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PHIL EMPRESSON

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THE TRAVELLER'S RETURN

PHIL EMPRESSON

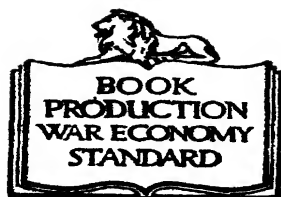
By

E. F. BOZMAN

LONDON

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PROLOGUE

PHIL EMPRESSON first came to my notice during the present war. He and his wife and daughter came to live next door to us, and we were somewhat taken aback because our attempts to be civil to the newcomers were frustrated by Empresson's manners, or rather lack of manners. One day, for example, when our chickens strayed through the hedge into his garden he came and stormed at me as if I were a criminal.

'Call those birds of yours off,' he shouted.

'Chuck, chuck,' I said, 'come on, chicks. Chuck, chuck, chuck.'

They did not come, of course, and he ran at them like a man possessed. The birds scattered wildly, some running, some flying. It took me half an hour to collect them again and smooth their ruffled feelings. Later I complained about his behaviour to my wife.

'That fellow next door is about the limit,' I said, and described his carryings on; 'what do you make of him?'

She told me how he had come in to borrow our telephone soon after their arrival, and had blown his head off at someone the other end. 'He's a bit of a nervous case, I think,' she said. 'Been knocked about in the blitz, I understand. Probably you saw him in those dark glasses when they first came here.'

'Did he pay for the call?' I asked.

'Now you mention it, I don't believe he did. I can ask his wife some time when I see her.'

'Mind you do,' I said, feeling considerable resentment against the man, and thinking of my panic-stricken chickens.

When the fine weather came I used to see Empresson sitting under a tree in his garden for hour after hour, writing. This went on for weeks, then months. I began to be a little

intrigued, because it is part of my job, in the publishing firm for which I work, to look out for likely manuscripts. I knew that Empresson was not a professional author, and I wondered what he was at. I asked my wife to find out, if she could, and she discovered that he was in business, and taking a long rest under doctor's orders. Some kind of nervous breakdown, we gathered. I remarked that I would have expected Mrs. Empresson to have the nervous breakdown.

Later the tension between my neighbour and me began to ease a little, perhaps because of the mediation of our respective wives, and I used occasionally to chat with him over the wall. I can't say I liked him, but I found him possible to talk to, up to a point. One day I asked him point blank what he was writing. He knew I was in publishing, so that the question did not seem impertinent to him.

Nevertheless he snapped my head off. 'Why do you think that I should write honest-to-goodness straightforward stuff?' he shouted. 'I am a crook, like you. Who am I to uplift or exhort? I waste my employer's time, drink too much, and look where I ought not to look, like you. Therefore if you hear from me, expect me to twist and turn, dodge the issues, falsify the evidence, and in general behave like a human being and a worm.'

'All right, all right,' I said, turning the other cheek, 'I only asked you a civil question.'

'I am writing some reminiscences of my own,' he said.

'Really?' I said politely. 'Your autobiography?'

'Yes,' he said, 'if you like to dignify it so. Rather perhaps a few stray memories, because I have nothing of particular interest to record. I have no public achievements, and nothing has happened to me that might not have happened to any one.'

There, I thought, but did not say, is the recipe for a popular book, if only it was well done.

'Will you let me see the manuscript?' I asked.

He looked at me to see if I was in earnest.

'It's not written for publication.'

'All the same,' I said, 'as a matter of interest . . .'

'All right,' he said suddenly. 'You shall have it. You shall see it, Bozman, as soon as it's typed.'

A week later he handed me the typescript which is printed in the following pages. I must say I found it interesting. Good? Well, that is a matter for the critics to settle. Popular? That is for the public to decide. I can only say that when I read it I decided to ask Empresson if he would let me publish it for him.

'Oh,' he said, 'publish—I don't know. Is it of general interest?'

'It might be,' I said.

'What do you think yourself?'

'I think it's worth having a shot at.'

'Why?'

Because your unpleasant, quarrelsome, selfish nature comes through in every line, I thought.

But I did not say that. Instead I said:

'Because I enjoyed it. Others may too.'

'It's a rough affair.'

'I know that, but don't touch it up. Let it go as you wrote it.'

'All right,' he said, 'let it go.'

And here it is, the story of Phil Empresson written by himself, with all its imperfections, and with no attempt, as far as I am aware, to place its central character in a favourable light. All I have done is to give him chapter headings.

I might add that the Empressons are no longer our neighbours. They moved back to London soon after he finished his book. Local gossip has it that Empresson 'had to leave' under doctor's orders. He was a mystery man in the village, and dark hints are thrown out. For my part I do

not know what has happened to him. As far as I am concerned he has gone off, leaving with me this record of unprovoked explosions, violent rudeness, and insane jealousies and suspicions. Wherever he is now, he will find it increasingly difficult, I am sure, to resort to the whisky which has been his standby while he lived next door to us. It may be however that he is a better business man than his father gave him credit for, since he has arranged with me that any royalties accruing from the publication of his book shall be paid to his solicitors, Messrs. Bell & Otley of Nottingham.

E F. B.

CHAPTER I

His Father's Will

THE day of the funeral dawned bright and cold. By noon the April sun had gained ascendancy, and there was a smell of spring in the air. Good Friday weather, I remember thinking, with a promise of a wet Easter. Actually it was Friday, 5th April 1940, and Good Friday and Easter were behind us—I remember the date because I had some trouble in establishing it with my father's solicitor, Mr. Bell, who had to travel from Nottingham for the occasion. Mr. Bell was always very precise in his arrangements, and to my telegram announcing my father's sudden death, and that the funeral would be on Friday, he replied: 'Deepest regret and commiseration please confirm date interment Bell.'

I was the only Empresson to attend the funeral, the other mourners being on my mother's side of the family: Uncle Henry, who had brought Aunt Rachel and Millicent with him, and my cousin Jack Drury with his new wife Pamela. The womenfolk did not come to the service, nor did Mrs. Evetts, my father's housekeeper. Her pale face was smothered in powder, down which tears had traced two furrows. She stood in the drive of The Laurels as the cortège drove off, wringing her hands, wearing her black stockings and self-respecting pointed black shoes with silver buckles.

There was quite a crowd in Godmansterne church for the funeral service. My father had been well liked and respected locally, and many of his friends turned up to pay their last tribute to him. Moreover he had been a keen supporter of the church. The rector, who wore a beautifully laundered surplice and smelled of good soap, was a

stranger to me; he read the service in a well-modulated, fruity voice, without giving any sign of personal emotion. I could not tell whether he was fond of the old man or not.

As we filed out to the churchyard the sun blazed on us. Gentle winds blew over us and ruffled our hair. On these breezes there seemed to come the long thoughts that assail every one at such moments, the promise of summer to some, the passing of winter to others. I saw tears in the eyes of some of my father's friends. Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; I had already said my private good-bye. 'I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write. From henceforth blessed are the dead. . . .'

Mr. Bell was standing next to me at the grave-side. He grasped my hand warmly, and we walked to the lich-gate together. Instead of going back to The Laurels with him I turned abruptly, and strode off through the village. The grass looked beautifully green, and the trees were just beginning to show red and brown, their leaves ready to unfold. My way led me over the common, where a spring fair was in progress. The canvas of the tents and booths was steaming after the rain of the last few days, and under the sodden trees women were cooking on stick fires. There were few visitors at that time in the morning, and the gipsy boys solicited me to try my hand with the shies. I pointed inwardly to my black tie, and walked on over the turf that was scarred and rutted by the wheel tracks of the invaders. All the fun of the fair did not lighten my mood, and I turned towards my father's house to take up my temporary duties as host.

Cousin Jack Drury greeted me at the front door of The Laurels.

'Hallo, old man. You look all in. Come and have a drink.'

'Thanks,' I said, 'how 's Pamela?'

'She's fine. She's washing and brushing up.' He rubbed his hands together, as if he were enjoying his wife's toilet. 'My condolences, old man,' he added, 'bad show.'

'Don't mention it,' was the only thing I could think of to say, but it did not seem suitable. Instead I asked him whether he had any special line on the progress of the war.

'A pal of mine,' he said, 'out in Iran seems to think there's trouble brewing there.'

'Yes,' I said, 'it looks like being a hot spot.' I was trying to visualize it on the map. 'Where is not trouble to be found? Verily . . .'

'Quite,' he said. 'Where, oh where?' He began to whistle a tune, and Pamela came down, watching him for his reaction to her make-up.

She took me in at a glance, and Jack said: 'You haven't met, have you? Pam, let me present cousin Phil.' We shook hands, or rather I encased her red nails for a moment. She said how-do-you-do to me and asked Jack to be a sweet and fetch her hand-bag. While he was gone I launched out on a sort of blurb which I had thought out beforehand, for her husband; she did not seem to recognize the picture, and we were interrupted to her relief by a message that Mr. Bell would like to see me if I could spare a few minutes. I excused myself and went to my father's study.

Mr. Bell was standing with his back to the gas-fire, looking out of the window at the evergreens and shrubs bordering the drive. I looked out of the window too, disregarding the well-worn arm-chairs, the mirror, the book-case. Then I sat at my father's roll-top desk, and faced his inkpot, his rulers, his pen, and his ash-trays. The smell of his stale smoke still clung to the room, and his house slippers were as he had left them behind the door. A dark grey smoking jacket hung on a hook, ready for him to put on, were he to come in, and for a moment I seemed to see his handsome

figure and his fine head of hair instead of the pinkness and baldness of his solicitor.

'Well, here is the, er, your father's will, Empresson. Quite a straightforward document, ahem, as you will see, which means what it says. Ah, means what it says!' Mr. Bell laid the will before me.

'Thank you,' I said. 'Have a drink.' Without looking up I pushed the whisky towards him.

'No, no, not at this time of day. It is not my habit. Er, not my habit.'

'Help yourself,' I said, and heard the liquid gurgle into his glass as I read:

THIS IS THE LAST WILL and TESTAMENT of me, Herbert Empresson, of Godmansterne in the County of Surrey.

I hereby revoke all wills made by me at any time heretofore. I appoint my son, James Philander Empresson, and Bell and Otley, Solicitors, of George Street, Nottingham, to be my Executors.

I give devise and bequeath . . .

'Here, Bell,' I said, 'shouldn't we have the others in at this point?'

'As you wish. It's for you to say, Empresson.'

I rang the bell, hoping that Mrs. Evetts would answer. I knew that my father had been an ardent bell-ringer.

'Well, here's to your very good health, Empresson, very good health.'

'And to yours, I'm sure.'

Mrs. Evetts came in, and I asked her to assemble the family.

'Shall you be wanting me, Mr. Phil?'

'Yes, by all means. Come, of course,' I said. 'One of the family.' I'm damned if she is, I thought to myself.

When we were all assembled, and chairs had been found, I announced nervously that I had a copy of my father's will, and that I proposed to ask Mr. Bell to read it. Uncle Henry nodded assent, and I handed over the documents to the lawyer, who began from the beginning again, reading every word in a clear and meticulous voice.

THIS IS THE LAST WILL and TESTAMENT of me, Herbert Empresson, of Godmansterne in the County of Surrey.

I hereby revoke all wills made by me at any time heretofore. I appoint my son, James Philander Empresson, and Bell and Otley, Solicitors, of George Street, Nottingham, to be my Executors.

I give devise and bequeath to my housekeeper, Harriet Evetts, the sum of one hundred pounds.

I stole a glance at Mrs. Evetts. Her ashen face was suddenly suffused by a painful blush, which spread down her neck. Was it because of the largeness or the smallness of the amount? Or was it simply at the mention of her name? I could not tell.

And the remainder of my estate real and personal including leasehold to my son absolutely.

In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand this thirty-first day of March in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and forty.

HERBERT EMPRESSON.

Dated only a few days before his death, I thought with a shock. I glanced hurriedly round the small company, none of whom were mentioned, except for Mrs. Evetts. Of course the old boy had told me on several occasions that he was going to leave everything to me, but I had deprecated the subject, and hardly even listened to what he said. Now he had been as good as his word.

It was typical of him. My sister was well off—married and living in New York—and so she was left out. Uncle Henry and Aunt Rachel had told him that they were not in need, and he had taken them at their word, even though they had been father and mother to me while I was growing up. In my embarrassment I gave no sign of my gratitude to my father. Perhaps he had paid Uncle Henry for my keep. I did not know. I avoided Aunt Rachel's eye, and merely listened to the concluding formality:

SIGNED by the testator, HERBERT EMPRESSON, in the presence of us, present at the same time, who at his request in his presence and in the presence of each other, have subscribed our names as witnesses,

GLADYS CAIN,
7 Herold Crescent,
Ealing, S.W.18.

WILLIAM ANSON,
c/o Bell & Otley,
Solicitors,
18 George Street,
Nottingham.

'Any other business?' I asked, as if I were addressing a company meeting.

'No, no, ah, I think not.' Mr. Bell glanced at me and hesitated, as if he were about to disclose something and then thought better of it. I gave him no encouragement. Every one there must have been wondering how much that document was worth to me.

'Then we can break up?'

He nodded.

In the hall Mrs. Evetts buttonholed me.

'Oh, Mr. Phil,' she said. There were tears in her eyes, and she was running at the nose. I failed to respond to this overture, and she said in a more cheerful, but cracked voice: 'What time will you be wanting lunch?'

'About one o'clock, I suppose. They'll all be here. Except me. Don't count me. I'm going out.'

'Going out?' she said reproachfully. Her eyebrows described semicircles against the pallor of her face.

'Yes, going out,' I said loudly, bringing the tears to her eyes again. How different from your dear father, her expression seemed to say. 'What is there for lunch?' I added.

'There's cold meat, Mr. Phil.'

'You would have cold meat to-day, you old ghoul,' I said; 'ask Mr. Drury to carve it, will you?'

CHAPTER II

Family Letters

THE Drurys, Uncle Henry, and Aunt Rachel, stayed overnight because they had to travel to the north of England, and needed to start early with the train services as bad as they were. After supper Uncle Henry played billiards with Jack and Pamela, to whom one end of a cue was the same as the other. The billiard table had been my father's special pride, and even I, now its owner presumably since it was part of his 'estate real and personal,' was somewhat shocked to think of Pamela slithering in her feminine way over and into the smooth green cloth. Millicent went to bed early—she looked delicate, I thought, beneath her high colour—and my aunt and I were left alone in the drawing-room, sitting on each side of the fire. She began to talk about my father, and gave me a new picture.

'Herbert was always the strong man of the family,' she said. 'He was the one we went to for advice or help.'

'You mean before he was married,' I said. I did not

intend to speak bitterly. I remembered my father's occasional comments on his sister and younger brother. He always gave me the impression that he admired their superior gifts and talents, and I had no idea that he helped them, or indeed that they ever needed help. Aunt Rachel was better off than we were, and the younger brother, Lionel, who was unmarried, had always been a dashing and brilliant figure in my eyes.

My aunt looked at me reproachfully. I realized that she was back in her childhood, where I could not accompany her, so I let her go on.

'When Lionel was about sixteen he got into difficulties. I don't know exactly what they were, even. I never heard. Your father helped him out. Also, at about the same time, I was threatened with consumption. I was fifteen at the time.'

I had heard that, and nodded.

'It was your father,' she went on, 'who got me treated seriously. Not our parents.' I thought of Millicent's flushed pallor. I had an idea that she was much moved by the fact of my father's death. 'Yes, he was to be relied on when anything went wrong. Your dear mother would tell you, if she were with us.'

'How's George?' I asked, changing the subject. George was Aunt Rachel's eldest son, my contemporary, the success of the family. Sir George Drury, K.C.I.E., Departmental Secretary of the Government of India. The gambit was successful, and my aunt switched to the next generation, thence rapidly to the next, her grandchildren, who were her favourite subject of conversation.

I was relieved, because I was afraid that she was in a mood to talk about my mother, and I did not want her to. She always assumed that, being one of the family, she knew my mother intimately. But this was not the case. They met only at my mother's wedding, after which my father

and mother went to America, where we lived during my childhood. My mother died without visiting the old country again, and it was after her death that I went to live with Uncle Henry and Aunt Rachel, and their family ranging from George to Millicent, twenty years younger.

I had nothing but gratitude for Aunt Rachel, but my relations with her were a little strained, because she assumed the functions of a mother to me when I was old enough to do without the one I had lost. From her point of view, out of the goodness of her heart, she was a mother to me, but from my point of view she was nothing of the kind. She must have done a thousand things for me that I have forgotten, she must have washed and mended my most intimate garments, have supervised my most private needs, have weighed carefully on my behalf the boyish problems I presented. But she was nothing to do with my mother, and I had no intention of comparing her in my mind. So that when she mentioned my mother I tried to head her off as quickly as possible, lest I might hear things I did not wish to hear.

When the grandchildren had been fully catalogued and scheduled, and the future of each of them envisaged and neatly laid out by my aunt, I again took the initiative.

'Would you like anything before you turn in?' I asked. 'A cup of tea or anything?'

'Thank you, dear, Mrs. Evetts will get me one. You must be tired out, Phil. Why don't you run off to bed? I will explain to your uncle, and there will be time for a family confabulation in the morning.'

I could see to that, I thought, in the morning. I could see that there was no time. I kissed her good night affectionately, and left the room, not, I must admit, to 'run off to bed,' but to follow my own devices.

My feet led me to the darkness of my father's study. I

struck a match and lit the gas-fire. Gradually the furniture of the room emerged in the glow from the fire. The wood of the roll-top desk glimmered and the wings of the arm-chair loomed. For a moment I parted the heavy curtains, hanging to the floor, drew aside the blackout, and saw the stars. When I sat down equilibrium was established between the main features of the room and me. The detailed traces of my father's occupation no longer obtruded. Instead, glamour and warmth pervaded the study, and the personality with which the room was chiefly associated, that of my father, hovered there.

I reached out my hand and pulled open the bottom drawer of his desk. On top lay a bundle of letters, done up in red tape. I took them up, and pulled the bow. 'Dear Daddy.' Good heavens, the first letter I saw was my own! In the glow of the fire I recognized with a tingle of embarrassment my own childish handwriting. It was in pencil. Nothing to learn here, I thought, and read:

DEAR DADDY,

It is lovely here by the sea. Their are ships a long way out. (Dimly I could see a small figure tumbling over the pebbles of an endless gleaming coastline.) We all sleep in a tent. (Who were 'we'? I could not differentiate between a jumble of boys and girls, some to be feared, some to be ignored.) Yesterday we went to the island. Now I must close.

With love from

PHIL.

Where was my mother then? Was she in the tent with 'us'? I did not think so, yet wondered that I should have written the letter without her encouragement. And if she was not in the tent, where was she? Why not 'Dear Mum and Dad'? Ah, here it was:

DEAR MUM AND DAD,

Thank you very much for the 2 dollars. There is no news hear. With love and kisses from

PHIL.

A monetary transaction, and a formal receipt. 'No news hear.' I had recently instituted a similar economy of method in my office—'No receipt other than endorsement of the cheque required'—though privately I still hoped that my clients would continue to acknowledge my benevolence in long and grateful letters.

Then I remembered the occasion. That letter was written when I was away from home for the first time in my life, staying with the Hopkinses in New Jersey. Why? Because my mother was ill. Mother was ill, mother who had hitherto been superior, as far as I knew, to all misfortunes and incapable of error. I treasured a mental picture of her as she was then, before that illness, a picture that I had made deliberately, while she was turning the other way, so that I might hold her, fix her for always, so that I should never lose her. But that illness was the beginning of other illnesses by means of which she began to slip through my fingers, unnoticeably at first, then more and more rapidly, until I was left clinging only to a moment of her time.

Eventually I lost her. I was swindled out of my best possession. Nobody told me, nobody explained to me. I was simply swindled, jockeyed out of my own. Like Czechoslovakia.' Oh, yes. There were specious arguments enough. Mummy is ill. Mummy is going away. Mummy has gone for a long holiday. You won't see her for a long time. You've got to be patient, dear, one day you'll understand. She's gone away, a long way away, for a long time, a long, long time, gradually extending to . . .

I could not bring myself to say the infinite word. I had expunged it from my vocabulary, and its sign from my

algebra. Liars, the lot of them, liars all, not excluding my dad. Liars and swindlers, not to be trusted.

Yet, as I sat in front of my father's gas-fire, I began to wonder whether he had really swindled me. Only a few days before he could have spoken. Only last week I could have asked him. But through all the intervening years he had said nothing to me on this subject. 'Let me not burst in ignorance,' I prayed. 'Let me not burst in ignorance while memory holds a seat in this distracted globe.'

The next letter was from my mother to my father. Despite my official position as his executor I read it with diffidence, and a sense of prying into a world where I had no business.

DEAR HERBERT,

You do sound an old bear! If you can't join us here, I think that you had better go to Mother's for next week. I should know that you were being looked after there at any rate; and that's something even if it doesn't suit your plans exactly.

Of course I want you here, dear, and so do the children. We are having a heavenly time, basking on the lake and picnicking, and Phil looks a different boy! I wonder if he really needs that operation. I think I shall get another opinion when we are back. Cicely has made great friends with the Hopkins family. An older boy and girl, and one younger girl. I allow her to go off with them. Phil makes a splendid little companion for me, and is as happy as the day is long.

Write more cheerfully next time, there's a dear.

Ever your loving, S.

I scanned the next letter. It too was from my mother.

DEAREST HERBERT,

All right, so be it, 'we'll come home, though I think it is wrong of you. You would think so yourself if

you could see how happy and healthy the children are with me here. So will you meet that evening train at the Pennsylvania station to-morrow?

S.

I wondered what the reunion brought about. Thinking back I could remember the joy of that summer holiday, and especially the excitement of the train journeys. For a moment, in memory, I had a glimpse of my father meeting us at the station, looking thin and worried. Apparently we postponed our return, however, and my father sent further supplies of money.

DEAREST DAD,

Thank you, dear, you are a darling. Ought you to spare that money? Five hundred dollars! It's more than we can afford, I'm sure.

Anyway you have, and here we all are still, revelling in everything. Honestly you'd feel rewarded, dear, if you could see us, and I wish you could. The children are in bathing things all day, and look fine. Phil's coming on wonderfully. His little figure's really filling out a bit (what right had they to observe my private growth towards manhood?) though he's probably growing too fast. He's taller than the other children of his age here.

Cicely's making great headway. She has taken on these Hopkinses, nice though common, at least Mrs. H. is, good-natured and friendly, but no interest in books or music, you know the type well enough, and I'm letting her cultivate them. Incidentally Dr. Hopkins and the eldest daughter, Beatrice, whom we haven't seen, are in N.Y. I enclose their address in case you wish to look them up. And by the way, Phil is getting more sensible, and is making great friends with little Una Hopkins.

So my mother knew about me and Una. That was news to me. As I read the letter I experienced a sense of alarm. What would my mother have said if she knew the outcome? Still I was sure of her. She would understand. She was my friend for better or for worse, I thought; and unreservedly in my favour.

They get on famously. Una's a few years younger than Phil, and I can't help wondering whether they mightn't really hit it off. There's looking ahead for you! It would be so good for Phil later on to have a steady friend. I shall do all I can to encourage it. Cicely agrees—I've taken her into my confidence a bit, she's old enough now, don't you think?

All the same I'm not altogether happy about Phil. I can't pretend I am. We're the best of friends, as you know, but there's a streak in him that positively frightens me.

As I read the sweat broke out on my forehead. I strained my eyes to read the incredible words, bending my head in front of the fire till its red elements nearly singed my hair.

We've discussed it before, so that you know what I'm talking about, but it's much more noticeable these holidays. You know the sort of thing I mean, when he behaves like a little animal, and seems to lose all control of himself. As if some demon had possession of him. He is utterly ruthless and inconsiderate in these moods, of me or of any one else. He just thinks of himself and goes all out for what he wants, regardless of other people's feelings or decency. In a boy of nine it's extraordinary.

Stars danced in front of my eyes. So searching a criticism, from such a source, was intolerable. The letter fell from my fingers, caught the fire, and blazed up in an instant. I

trod out the curling ash. The clock on the mantelpiece struck a single silver stroke, and when I stood up to read the face, expecting to see half-past eleven, it was one o'clock in the morning. I turned off the gas and 'ran off to bed' as my aunt had suggested. But not to sleep. Lying on my side I stared at the pattern of the wall-paper. In its mechanical repetition I contrived to find some distraction from the welter within myself. I jumped out of bed and looked at myself in the glass. A hollow ring from under the bed mocked the spectacle that faced me, flushed over its pallor, ringed under its eyes, with a frown bitten into its forehead.

CHAPTER III

Telephone Offensive

IN the morning I got up and dressed early. I was ahead of my aunt and uncle and cousins, and breakfasted with Mrs. Evetts.

'Shall you be having company this week-end, Mr. Phil?' she asked.

'Company?' I said, 'what company?'

'I think it would cheer you up,' she said. 'Take your mind off things.' She was dressed in black and very pale from crying. To disguise the traces she had put on large quantities of powder. Her nose was red and her hair peroxided, so that the general effect was that of a clown. I filled in the picture by crediting her with enormous feet in carpet slippers, under the table, although she had in fact elegant feet, long and thin below a well-turned ankle.

'I shall be going back to London,' I said. The evenings stretched in a long thin line ahead of me.

Mrs. Evetts looked at me miserably, and slipped a charred piece of bacon between her dentures. She made no comment.

'Would you like to come up and do for me?' I asked. Nothing had been further from my thoughts than to offer Mrs. Evetts a job.

'Oh, Mr. Phil.' Her eyes welled. 'Do you think I would be suitable for you?'

'Yes, of course,' I said hurriedly, 'ideal arrangement.'

She poured out another cup of coffee for me, and pushed the marmalade in my direction, as if to show what she could do. We were interrupted by the arrival of Aunt Rachel and Millicent, and I left them to look after themselves. In the hall I met Jack Drury, smoking a pre-breakfast cigarette and smelling of hair oil.

'Where's Pam?' I asked. Why did the sight of him always make me say that?

'She's fixing her hair. She'll be down.'

Jack always seemed to be in some such position with his new wife. No doubt he had his rewards. Ten minutes later, when I passed again, he was still there, his hearty smile becoming a little fixed.

'Still waiting, old man?' I said with a wink.

'Yes.'

'Ah, well, they're all the same. It's their prerogative, what?' I had breakfasted well and could afford to be philanthropic.

'I wonder what she's up to,' he said.

'Fixing her hair. You told me so yourself. Well make yourself at home, old man.' I passed on, and into my father's study.

I could not help wondering what had happened to make my father redraft his will so recently. He had a clock inside his head, he used to say, which struck at the hours of his destiny. As a child I had often tried to picture this

clock; something in the nature of a kitchen alarm, though it was hard to see how there could be room for such an odd-shaped thing inside a head; at the critical moments I could visualize the precarious oscillation of the knob. Well, it must have gone off only a week before his death. And seeing that he had drawn a new will, I could not help wondering what was in the old one that he had wanted to alter at the last moment. I determined to make some inquiries, after the proper interval. No doubt Mr. Bell would tell me. I had every right to ask, I felt.

During the morning I saw off my next of kin, and telephoned to Miss Cain, my father's secretary and mine, to tell her that they might expect me back at the office the following week. She spoke to me with the indulgence that is usually offered to invalids and sufferers, and received my information. I could hardly recognize that normally tough baby.

At the end of the week I went back to London. Its streets blazed in the long spring sunshine. In the evenings, after my day's work, I walked the squares. There were few children about that spring, and I missed the shrill clamour from the tenement houses. I did not wish to see friends or relatives, and I spent my time alone. In the quiet of my room I heard the whisper of creation, the news that is not in the newspapers, the morning tidings of joy beneath the mountain of organization.

Mrs. Evetts came to 'do' for me as soon as my father's effects were in order. It was arranged that she should keep an eye on The Laurels, until I decided to dispose of it, by spending one or two days a week there.

One evening she brought me a letter, addressed to my father. I examined the envelope carefully, hesitating to open it. I had not then much experience of opening other people's letters. It was addressed originally to Herbert Empresson, Esq., The Crown Hotel, Nottingham, in what

I judged to be a feminine hand, and had been forwarded from there to The Laurels, Godmansterne, Surrey. The postmark was of recent date, suggesting that my father must have been in Nottingham only a week or two before his death. This was so surprising to me that I said:

'Was Mr. Empresson away from home the week before he died?'

'Yes, Mr. Phil. He was. He went to Nottingham for a day or two. He wasn't looking well enough to travel, and I urged him not to go. I only hope . . .'

'To Nottingham?'

'Yes, to see Mr. Bell.'

'Oh, of course. I might have guessed.'

'I hope I haven't done wrong, Mr. Phil. I tried to persuade him not to travel. . . .' She wrung her hands.

I dismissed her, and ripped the envelope with my thumb.

'Dear Herbert,' I read, in what was now obviously a woman's handwriting. I glanced at the address on the headed notepaper, and saw:

THE RECTORY,
GODMANSTERNE.

Tel. 17.

DEAR HERBERT,

I did not think you looked fit to travel when you left for Nottingham, and have been quite anxious about you. Anyhow I hope that your journey is bearing fruit, though why you should take so much trouble and risk your health on behalf of that ungrateful, and in my opinion entirely selfish son of yours, passes my comprehension.

This devastating attack on myself, launched only a week or two ago at my own father, froze my blood. On the rebound I blushed furiously, and instinctively shielded my

face with my hands. Who was this female who was so disgustingly familiar with my father? It dawned on me that the poison had never reached the ears for which it was intended. This thought gave me momentary relief while the venom infiltrated me instead. Who was this woman? I thought with rising indignation; who was this person, unknown to me, who dared thus to pass judgment on me? I read on:

The garden is just beginning to look lovely, so come round as soon as you are back, and we shall have one of our famous talks.

Please remember me cordially to Mr. Bell when you see him, and for goodness' sake stick to your guns, Herbert. My brother says the same.

Yours very sincerely,

CAMILLA SMALLWOOD.

The traitor, I thought. The name leapt to my mind at once. Smallwood, the man who had buried my father. I could smell his good soap. I was so mad with fury that I threw all thoughts of propriety to the winds and lifted the telephone.

'Godmansterne, one seven, please. Yes, 17.' When the number came through a woman's voice said: 'Hallo.'

'Hallo,' I said, 'can I speak to Miss Smallwood?'

'This is Miss Smallwood speaking.'

'Oh, yes.'

'Who is it, please?'

'This is Empresson, Phil Empresson.' I could almost hear her gasp. I rushed straight in. 'What do you mean by that letter to my father?'

There was no answer.

'What the devil do you mean?' I went on.

She hesitated for a moment. 'I think I had better fetch my brother,' she said.

'No, you had better not,' I said. 'I wouldn't speak to him with the end of a barge pole.'

'Cyril,' I heard her call, and for a few moments there were only small telephone chitterings. She must have gone to explain to him. Then I heard a well-oiled fruity voice.

'Well,' he said, 'what is it? What do you want?' He was trying to put me in the position of a blackmailer.

'What is it!' I shouted. 'What the hell do you mean by talking to me like that, and who are you, anyway?'

'You know perfectly well who I am, my man. I am Cyril Smallwood, and I understand from my sister that I have the pleasure of speaking to Mr. Empresson junior.'

'Put a sock in it,' I said.

'Now, now,' he said, 'be reasonable, please. There is no need to lose your temper. What exactly is it you want from my sister?'

'In the first place I want to tell her what I think of her. In the second, I want to ask her what she means by a letter that is now in my hand.' I crumpled the letter menacingly.

'I think you had better write, Mr., er, Empresson,' he said witheringly. 'Or come and see me. Yes, that would be better. Come and see us. Your father was one of our best friends, and we should like, my sister and I, to continue the association.'

'Go to the devil,' I said, and slammed my receiver.

My feelings were relieved, but not my sense of justice. If I could lay my hands on Miss Smallwood, I thought, I would wring her stringy neck. An imaginary little woman swelled and shrivelled at the far end of the telephone line. What hold had she over my father that gave her the right to criticize his son? What was her game?

'What's the idea, dad?' I said aloud in a more reasonable voice. 'What have you been up to?' But of course there was no answer.

'Did you call me?' Mrs. Evetts put her head into the room.

'No, I did not.'

'I'm so sorry. I was sure I heard something.'

'I was probably talking to myself. I sometimes do.'

The old geezer, I thought, she has obviously been listening outside the door.

She was leaving the room when I called her in again.

'Mrs. Evetts.'

'Yes, Mr. Phil.'

'Come in a minute, will you? I want to ask you a question.'

She folded her hands over her black silk stomach and assumed the pious look of one who is about to hear gossip.

'Did my father know the Smallwoods well?' I asked.

'Oh, yes, Mr. Phil. Very well. He was always down at the rectory. Surely you knew that.'

I shook my head.

'Yes, yes. Tea one day, supper the next. And if he didn't go there Miss Smallwood used to write him long letters. They had interests in common, your father used to tell me.'

'Interests in common? What sort of interests? Simple or compound?'

'She was a very clever woman, Miss Smallwood was, so your father used to tell me. Intellectual, you might say. You see she could talk to him in a way I couldn't.' Mrs. Evetts snivelled at the thought. 'Oh, yes, she could talk to him about all the things that interested him—they used to chew the rag for hours,' she added, more cattily.

'My goodness!' I said.

Mrs. Evetts looked at me with a glint of a smile on her white face and dull eyes. I had the impression that she would have winked if she had known me better. 'You're a man of the world, Mr. Phil,' she said.

I accepted the label, whatever it might mean.

'Men are all the same.' Her voice grew shriller. 'They can't resist a bit of skirt. Now, my husband, when he was alive, poor dear . . .'

'I don't agree with you at all,' I interrupted.

Mrs. Evetts's face fell, her reminiscence nipped in the bud. She withdrew, and I was left to consider my position. There was no hurry from my point of view, and I wrote a letter to Mr. Bell asking if I might come to see him in Nottingham during the summer.

CHAPTER IV

A Visit from a Young Woman

THE sun poured down on the London streets in Parisian fashion, and I could imagine what it must be like in the country with the may out, and the lilacs and brier roses coming. The generosity of the sun seemed to have no concern with the bloodshed in Europe. It was impossible to visualize the nearby suffering. The London shops were full of goods, and the greengrocers were beginning to show the new season's vegetables.

The bell rang and I heard Mrs. Evetts creaking slowly to the front door. After what seemed a long pause she came back to my room and knocked.

'Come in,' I said.

'A young lady to see you, Mr. Phil.' She managed to convey by her glance that my visitor was nothing of the sort.

'A young lady?' I said. 'What's her name?'

'She didn't say. But she asked for Mr. Empresson.'

'Perhaps she means my father. Ha ha!' My attempted joke was withered by Mrs. Evetts's reception of it.

'Shall I show her in, Mr. Phil?'

'Oh, yes, show her in by all means, show her in,' I said airily, as if I were accustomed to such visits.

The young woman who was shepherded into my room, with the door closed behind her angrily by Mrs. Evetts, was not of striking or flashy appearance, and was dressed with signs of poverty. 'Are you Mr. Empresson?' she asked, standing first on one leg, then on the other. Her meagre clothes looked as if they would slip off at a moment's notice. Her face beneath a fringe of straight black hair was disarming, and her figure small and bony. Her thinness might be due to under-nourishment, I thought.

'Yes, I am Mr. Empresson. How do you do?' I said, offering my hand.

'I'm Alec's sister.'

'Alec?'

'Yes, you remember.'

I did remember, of course. Alec was the ship's boy on the *Europa*, in which I had recently returned from a cruise to Norway. During the cruise war had screamed at us ever louder from the radio, and the passengers, mostly British, had avoided each other, feeling the approach of a storm beyond the umbrellas of the British Empire. Some were embarrassed, some afraid, some artificially cheerful. Alec, however, in his blue jersey and rough cloth, did not seem to worry, and used to exchange a few words with me in a half friendly, half surly manner. He seemed to have swallowed human behaviour whole, perhaps as a result of a year or two's observation of British pleasure-cruisers, and nothing, not even an approaching world war, surprised him. He surprised me, however, on the last day of the voyage. There had been a thunderstorm, I remember, and the rain came teeming down, swilling the decks and drenching the

awnings. 'Come and see us in London,' he said. 'Who are us?' I asked. 'Me and my sister.' 'All right, I will.' We exchanged addresses.

Well, here she was, and no mistake. I examined her keenly.

'Do sit down.' I indicated an arm-chair.

She did so and I waited for her to speak. I had to wait a long time. In her aptitude for silence she resembled her brother. At last she said:

'Alec told me to come and see you.'

'Oh, yes.'

'I asked the lady whether I might come up.'

'The lady?'

'Yes, your lady outside.'

'Quite.' I lit a cigarette. 'Do you smoke?' She did. 'How is Alec?'

'He's all right.'

'Where is he now?'

'He's at sea again.'

All right, I thought, all right at sea, on the U-boat-haunted, mine-sown waters. My feet sank into my soft carpet. In was at a loss for conversation, and a glance at my visitor suggested to me that she was famished.

'Would you like some refreshment, er . . .?'

'Call me Rose,' she said.

'Some sandwiches and something to drink?'

'That's right.'

I went out to fix things with Mrs. Evetts, and asked her what she thought of my visitor. Nothing could have been plainer than the warning lift of her eyebrows.

'She looks a nice little girl, Mr. Phil. Better than some of 'em,' she added darkly.

I carried the tray, and set it down beside my visitor.

'Help yourself,' I said. Her clothes seemed to have slipped imperceptibly during my absence.

I drew my chair beside her and watched her eat.

'Well, er, Rose?'

She scooped out the bread from the front of her mouth with her tongue.

'I'll give you a wonderful time, darling,' she said.

My goodness! I thought. We could hear Mrs. Evetts moving about outside.

'Where do you live?' I asked.

She searched among the lipsticks in her handbag and found a piece of paper with her name and address on it.

'17 Sussex Street,' I read in pencil.

'That's where I am,' she said.

'Oh, yes. I see.'

She was a year older than her brother, she told me. That made her eighteen, I estimated. She made enough money, she said, to keep herself, and a bit over for Alec when he came home. Alec was in a different category from other men. He was to be trusted. Not so men as a species, or boys, for that matter. Not so even her particular friend, 'though he treated her well.'

'You mean financially?' I asked.

She missed the point. 'He's ever so rich,' she said.

'What's his line?'

She did not know, or did not want to tell me. Anyway I did not care.

'Can I take my hat off?' she asked.

'Yes, of course.'

'I'll go into your bedroom—shall I?'

'Yes, do,' I said. 'I'll show you.' She winked at me in a friendly way. 'Now, only your hat, mind you.' I added.

'Go on!' she said.

It was dark when I saw her out of my front door.

'How are you going to get home?' I asked.

'I'll get a bus,' she said.

'Where to?'

'Now then, Mr. Jealous!'

Oh, go your own way, I thought, and said: 'But you can't go walking the streets of the West End in the black-out.'

'Says who?'

I had nothing further to say. It was her business, of course. Beneath her jaunty manner I caught a glimpse of the length and breadth of her suffering. To bear pain was her element. If relief were to come she would not open her eyes. As for a right to happiness, an Atlantic Charter of freedom from fear and want, such things were nothing to do with her.

'Your turn will come,' I said aloud. In imagination I saw the touching moment.

'What did you say?' she asked eagerly. When I did not reply the eagerness left her manner. She stood there in the glimmer from my hall light, wearing her hat and her eye-veil, and the thin coat, almost worn out, which covered the many deficiencies of dress beneath. A cautious, professional note came into her voice.

'Can I have my fare?'

'Oh, of course.' I tumbled inelegantly off my high horse to the stone steps beside her, and took out my leather note-case, which was bulging with new notes from a cheque that I had cashed only that morning. Concealing its bulkiness, I felt for the notes with my fingers, and pulled out a little wad, much less than half the contents of the wallet.

She was evidently surprised by the size of the gift. 'Thank you, darling, you are a sport,' she said, as she slipped the wad into the top of her stocking. I could feel her gratitude in terms of something I could not guess, food or warmth or clothes perhaps, while the larger residue burned a hole in my pocket.

'Well, good-bye, Rose,' I said.

'Good-bye.' She hesitated for a moment, and I thought that she was going to take the initiative. But she thought better of it.

'Go straight home,' I added.

'O.K. Well, so long.'

She pattered off. The sound of her heels on the pavement soon faded. The ugly iron railings, and the blacked-out street lamps, and my own front door crowded round me.

CHAPTER V

Appointment with a Solicitor

My appointment with Mr. Bell was fixed for the middle of May, and I left London in lovely summery weather. The train from St. Pancras was crowded, and the passengers were filled with apprehension at the news in their papers. Furtive glances were exchanged, and eyes searched for crumbs of reassurance, only to be met by still blacker, more devastating headlines.

Just as the whistle blew for the train to leave a party of four were bundled in, a woman in a smart travel outfit, behind her a boy, then a taller girl in a round turned-up hat, then a dapper husband with a small moustache. They were cluttered up with suitcases. I offered my seat to the woman, and helped to put some of the cases on the rack. I noticed the name 'Childs' on the labels. Could it be? I wondered, and looked intently at the girl in the turned-up hat. For the name of Hebe Childs, juvenile star, who could fill the Albert Hall for a pianoforte recital, was on every one's lips at that time.

I stood in the corridor with the man and the two children.

The boy let off a series of private jokes to his sister which she tried to suppress by every means of disapproval, because of the publicity. I was standing next to the boy, and some miles out of London I spoke to him.

'What 's the first stop?' I asked, presupposing his interest in trains.

He was not aware of my existence, and looked round to see where the voice came from.

'What 's the first stop?' I requested.

'Beg pardon,' he said politely.

'What 's the first stop?' I said angrily. The question began to sound more and more idiotic, especially as I knew the answer.

'I don't know,' the boy said; 'do you, dad?'

'What 's that, Roy?' the father shouted above the rattle of the train.

'What 's the first stop?'

'Luton,' the father answered correctly. With his neat moustache he looked as if he might have a model railway of his own.

The boy resumed his sister-baiting, until, as a last resort, she put her hand over his mouth. 'Oh, shut up, Hebe,' I heard him say in a muffled way. That confirmed my diagnosis, and I looked at the girl again. She was about fourteen, I should have said, and wore glasses. Her hands were white, with short nails. The fingers were long and independent, unlike the bunches of bananas that are often to be seen on girls of that age. They looked as if they could be dancing, thrusting fingers, but now they hung relaxed and uninterested. Her eyes behind the glasses had an obstinate, baffled look, very different from the vivid concert personality that I had seen once or twice, idol of London's musical public, Hebe Childs.

I caught the father's eye, and said: 'Is the boy musical, too?'

He nodded lightly, staving off further intimacy. He must have been used to such impertinences. The head-hunting instinct in me would not be suppressed, and throwing discretion to the winds I addressed a remark to Hebe herself. Not exactly a *rémark*, perhaps, but I whistled the tune of the slow movement from a Schubert piano sonata that I had heard her play, thus simultaneously attracting her attention and showing that I was one of the *élite*.

It fell completely flat. Either she did not hear properly or else her reserve held me off. She gave a glance in my direction, and resumed her affair with her brother. I was reduced to star-gazing like any one else, until someone made room for her inside the carriage and she went off to join her mother. From the ordinary look of her no one would have guessed that she was a public figure. 'I thought I saw the friendly busts of Bach, Mozart, and Schubert grouped round her shoulders. 'Our new interpreter,' they said.

There was a shower of rain before we reached Nottingham. It slashed the corridor windows diagonally, and the drips began to course down, finding their own ways over the dirty glass. At the station I left the Childs family wrestling with their numerous suitcases. The macadam streets and pavements smelt sweet after the rain.

I walked from the station to Mr. Bell's office. 'HEBE CHILDS,' I read on the posters, in huge letters. 'HEBE CHILDS, 2s., 3s. (unreserved), 5s., 8s., 12s.' Oh, yes, I thought, young Hebe Childs, a friend of mine. A man came and posted 'All Seats Sold' over one of the posters. I felt the glow of personal success.

I took care to arrive early for my appointment, and was received by a male employee who showed me into the waiting room and gave me a horse-hair chair and a copy of *The Times*, in which I glanced at the terrible news, the stories of bloodshed and disaster, so strange a contrast with my surroundings of files and documents, the silent evidence

of man's attempts at perpetuity. The clerk appeared to be doing the work of an office boy, yet his expression was of one who is 'confidential,' that is to say, one who minds other people's business. I watched his behaviour covertly between snatches of news-stories that concealed heroic sacrifices of human life and deeds of extraordinary gallantry and unselfishness by young men who had nothing to gain but everlastingly honourable niches in their comrades' memories. These deeds, I thought, etched deeper than words; thereby is the sword mightier than the pen. Even while I watched this elderly man going about his business the young men were throwing away some such future which precaution might have secured for them.

'He who is eager in running risks gets killed, he who is eager in not running risks survives. Of the two aims the one is as advantageous as the other is disadvantageous, yet both may be equally abhorred of Heaven.'

A bell rang, the clerk replied on the house phone, and told me that Mr. Bell was ready to see me. 'This way, Mr. Empresson.' I stood up among the files, the dusty dead men's ideas, and we went upstairs.

'Are you Mr. Anson?' I asked on the staircase, remembering the witness's signature to my father's will.

'Yes,' he said. 'William Anson.'

'Then you knew my father, Mr. Herbert Empresson?'

'I met him, sir. I can hardly say I had the pleasure of knowing him.'

How trustworthy, I thought. 'And yet you signed his will, his most private document?'

'Only as a witness.' I could not tell whether this confidential man knew the contents. 'Only as a witness. I must have signed many hundreds in that capacity. "Will" Anson, the office boys call me.'

Mr. Anson was a little man with a large head and sweeping moustache. He wore an old-fashioned stiff collar and a dark

suit, carefully brushed but shiny with sitting. His signature, too, sat tidily on its shiny parchments, unobtrusively but effectively appended to the testaments of many full and varied lives, some still in pulsing activity, others, like my father's, changed to the unknown realm of spirit and indirect action. Between the lines of those legal parchments lay the natural love between man and woman, their doubts and fears of the way ahead, their passion, their affection, their happiness, their sorrow, their youth, their age, their hope, their death, their immortality in their heirs and assigns.

As we parted at the top of the stairs I shook Mr. Anson warmly by the hand, much to his surprise.

Mr. Bell greeted me heartily. His office was large and book-lined, plainly furnished, and without any modern office conveniences.

'Well, Emprisson,' he said, 'this is indeed a pleasure. Sit down, my dear fellow, sit down.' He motioned me to an arm-chair at a spacious distance from his own. Here is a setting, I thought, for wordy exchanges. If words could be effective anywhere, now is their chance over this broad desk.

We talked desultorily for a few minutes before I took the plunge.

'I want to ask a question,' I said.

'Yes, indeed. Go ahead, Mr., er, Emprisson.'

'Do you know of any undisclosed claim on my father's estate?'

Mr. Bell looked at me keenly.

'You know that your father came here just before his death?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said. 'I know now. A letter addressed to him at the Crown Hotel, Nottingham, came accidentally into my possession.'

'And you want to ask me why he made the journey?'

I nodded.

'Do not jump to the conclusion that your father had anything to hide, any more than you have.'

'No, of course not.' When I thought of my father, of his eminently respectable life with Mrs. Evetts at Godmansterne, when I thought of The Laurels and of my father's personal appearance, his tall well-dressed figure and his sweep of iron-grey hair, suggesting a nonconformist preacher, nothing was further from my mind. But when I thought of myself . . .

'Do you want to hear the story?' he said.

'I do.'

'I must, of course, respect your father's confidences.'

'Quite.'

'He wished the purpose of his visit to Nottingham to be kept private, except under certain conditions.'

'Are those conditions fulfilled?'

'Not as far as I know.'

'It's most unusual for me to insist on hearing something, isn't it?' I said emphatically.

Mr. Bell looked at me anxiously, trying to divine what I was thinking.

'Your father came to Nottingham because he wished to make certain dispositions during his lifetime, and thus escape the payment of part of the death duty. You see, he was not then expecting to be called so soon.'

I laughed aloud. 'Not expecting to be called so soon,' I said. 'That's what I feel like every morning.'

'What?' Mr. Bell said irritably. His train of thought was broken. He looked at me as if I were unfit to discuss business. I could feel the incompatibility rising between us. When I thought of my father, of his generosity to others, of his geese who were all swans, of his world peopled with immortals, I knew that I did not want to hear about him from the lips of this lawyer.

'It is my duty to warn you,' Mr. Bell said, as if reproving

me for flippancy, 'that your financial position may not be quite what you expect. Er, not quite what you expect.'

'What do you mean?' I said, with the nervousness of one who has always had money behind him.

'At present I can speak only in general terms, because no claim has been made against the estate, and your father did not empower me to speak. But you have little to fear, Empresson, if you play your cards wisely. Little to fear. That is my opinion.'

'Thank you,' I said. My gratitude was genuine.

'As a matter of practical politics,' Mr. Bell continued benevolently, 'I would advise you not to undertake any, er, heavy liabilities at present.'

'Naturally.'

'Indeed for you to do so just now would be, er, the height of folly.'

My silence must have emboldened him, for he then took the initiative.

'Are your private commitments likely to increase in the near future?'

'Goodness knows,' I said, feeling hot under the collar.

Mr. Bell smiled blandly. 'We are men of the world, you and I, Empresson, and for the purpose of this talk, there is no need for us to consider the circumstances under which you happen to be separated from your lady wife. Is there, er, another young woman in the case?'

I shook my head and said nothing.

'I applaud your good taste,' he said.

I did not applaud his. If I did not want to hear of my father's private affairs from this man, still less did I want to discuss my own marriage. Mr. Bell then began to advise me in fatherly style, but my attention wandered. I had gone to him for the lawyer, not for the priest, and from my point of view he was ineffective outside his own field. Seeing that he was not free to tell me exactly how my father's

affairs stood I wanted nothing more from him. I hardly heard the rest of his well-meant talk, and was about to make my escape when it occurred to me that he might be useful to me later. In any case there was no harm in keeping up the appearance of friendship. I had few enough friends, in all conscience.

'Come and dine with me at the "Crown" this evening,' I said. 'We could carry our discussion a little further if you are agreeable.'

Mr. Bell beamed with pleasure at this unexpected overture. No doubt he felt that his advice had been taken in good part, though this was not the case.

'Most kind of you, my dear fellow, most kind. But no, no. You must come to us. Come to us, we shall be delighted.' As he spoke he turned the pages of his diary. 'Ah, wait, let me see. Dear me, we are out to-night. A most rare event for us. Most rare. We have tickets for a concert to-night—my wife is passionately fond of music, you know—Hebe Childs is playing.'

'Hebe Childs?' I said.

'You know her?'

'Yes,' I began, then recollecting my surroundings said, 'or rather I met her. I can hardly say I have the pleasure of knowing her.' This paraphrase of 'Will' Anson was so unlike my usual style that it had the effect of making Mr. Bell look at me curiously.

'Indeed, indeed?' he said. 'I would ask you to join us, but our seats are booked already.'

After a little general conversation I took my leave. Bell shook hands warmly.

'Good-bye and good luck, Empresson. Let me know if I can be of any assistance to you. I shall hope to hear good news.'

This I recognized as propaganda for my lady wife. 'Good-bye,' I said, and thought: Good news, who does not

hope for good news? There is no good news. Only the bad, the death and disaster, is news. The good news works secretly, silently. 'Good-bye,' I said, 'and thank you again.'

'We may see you after the concert? You 'll be there, of course?'

'No, I think not. I must get back to London.'

'To-night, my dear fellow? But I thought you said you were staying at the "Crown."'

'There is just time for me to catch the evening train,' I said lamely. Who was he to inquire into my comings and goings?

CHAPTER VI.

London by Night

NEXT morning my housekeeper, calling me sooner than I expected, said:

'Have you heard the news?'

'No,' I said, 'what news? Has the squire's daughter been foully murdered?'

'France is out of the war.'

I could not believe it. Dieppe, Rouen, Paris, Lyons, Marseilles, Hyères, Nice, flashed past my windows. I jumped to Chamonix, and thence in one bound to the summit of Mont Blanc. France could not have become a strutting ground for Germans. I saw the fatuously tilted German caps, and their over-impressive uniforms. Boulogne, Calais—I leapt out of bed, hearing the drone of aeroplanes overhead. They were our own, flashing in the sun.

'How are you feeling this morning, Mrs. Evetts?' I asked her, not wanting to know.

She began to tell me, however. 'Rather queer,' she said. 'Oh, I do feel queer.' Certainly she looked white.

'What's the matter? Headache?'

'No, it's my organs. Ever since my operation. When the doctor took them out he said I should suffer to the end of my life. I miss them, you see.'

I tried unsuccessfully to visualize who or what 'they' were.

'They turn on me when I get tired.'

'Yes, quite.'

'No bleeding now.'

'Oh, no, of course not. After all these years.'

'Well, it's not so long,' she said indignantly. 'Only two years last Christmas. Boxing Day as a matter of fact—the doctor should have been on his holiday by rights. I don't believe he'd have done it for any one else.'

'No, I don't suppose he would.'

"We'll carve you to-day, mother," he said. "So that I'll be cold for Sunday?" I asked. We always had our little joke.'

'What was his reply to that?' I asked, discarding the rest of my liver and bacon.

The kettle boiled over in the next room, and I was left alone. As a matter of fact, I knew the answer. There were two variations. Sometimes he said: 'You'll get over it and live for years, Mrs. Evetts,' and sometimes: 'It's not your joints I'm after, it's your guts.'

When she came back, she said: 'What would you like for your supper? A nice chop?'

'I shan't be in.'

'Oh,' she said, 'out again. I never see you now.'

A telephone from my office called me. Would I speak to Miss Cain urgently?

The matter was certainly urgent. A discrepancy had been discovered in our accounts. Some hundreds of pounds were involved. I would be right along, I said, as if that would settle anything. Or rather I would be along soon after eleven. Business was meant, I indicated. The rot was to be stopped, and the guilty parties were to be exposed. 'Spineless gestures' would be of no avail. Things were going to be very different.

Although not on the face of it an occasion for celebration I stood myself half a cupful of Old Highland Scotch Whisky, and stepped out of my flat singing. Rubbing my face judicially I realized that I had not shaved. This delayed my progress to work, and it was after half-past eleven, time indeed for another tonic, before I made my appearance.

I summoned the cashier, white-haired and pink-cheeked, with gold-rimmed spectacles, and his two clerks, one black-haired and sleek with powerful horn rims and the other red-haired with rimless lenses. I stared at the glasses in turn, trying to see behind which the secret lurked. They gave no sign. The gold rims took the responsibility and drew my attention to the various accounts. What were this and this and this? I asked, choosing items at random in the hope of exposing a flaw. Nothing came to light. Everything was decorous and in order. And what were these expenses? What was the meaning of them? I pointed my finger accusingly to the item. The horn rims explained suavely that they were my own. And what was the meaning of this and this and this? The rimless lenses pulled the wool over my eyes with his contras and journal entries. By this time the glasses were dancing round me with deadly accuracy, like searchlights on their air prey. I took evasive action. How do you account for it? I asked the gold rims. He deprecated. There are the documents, he suggested behind his benignity. Do your own dirty work. The horn rims smoothed it over. Perhaps it might be better to call in an

expert. You swine, I thought, you've done it. The rimless lenses implied that they were the experts. I felt as if I had strayed into a brains trust. The realities of the situation, the fact that the money was missing, were overlaid.

They began to make me feel that the mistake might be on paper only, that nothing had been stolen. But I refused to accept the analgesic. What are you making all this fuss about? they said between them. If you don't trust us to look after your affairs you can damn well look after them yourself.

All right, I thought, all right—though nothing frank was spoken—I'll call your bluff. You can clear out, the lot of you. Aloud I said, to the three of them:

'You can have till to-morrow.'

The shock brought them all to attention.

'You can have till to-morrow to clear this up between you.'

'But your father, Mr. Empresson.' The white-haired head was trembling. 'Your father would never countenance such a thing. He and I have worked together for thirty-five years. There has never been the slightest friction between us.'

'My father is underground,' I said.

'But the business,' he went on. 'I have it at my fingers' ends. There is no one else. . . .'

I ignored him and turned to the younger men.

'You can have till to-morrow morning,' I said. 'Unless this matter is in order by then I shall take what steps may be necessary.'

Horn-rims went pale. I could see 'police' in his mind. Rimless continued to smile. He was clever enough to know that I was responsible. If there was negligence, it was mine. Yet they did not between them succeed in voicing their very reasonable objection to my neglect of my job.

In order to break up the party I stood up. 'But, Mr. Empresson,' the white hair implored.

He pushed paper after paper in front of me. I brushed them aside. 'Mr. Emprisson, you cannot desert us at this stage. Your father's business is at stake.'

'I can look after my father's business,' I said, and in the general atmosphere of disgust I left the room.

When I thought of the patient work my father had put into this concern I was full of resentment at being twisted out of my property. The open breach with my colleagues had one good effect, however. I went to the nearest bar and felt free to enjoy a drink as if I had truly earned it.

I swallowed one thirstily, and pledged myself in another, and yet another.

On such an occasion, I told myself, it is not right to be alone, and I began to consider how I would spend the afternoon. Rose occurred to me as a possible companion. I was wondering how to find her, and contemplating how we might spend the time together when I did, when a voice behind me said:

'Excuse me, sir, but that's my whisky.'

'Oh, I beg your pardon; I beg your pardon. Sorry, old man,' I said, and ordering another for myself added: 'May I buy you one, sir? May I have the pleasure?'

The stranger looked at me keenly.

'No, thank you,' he replied, and I felt an exchange pass between him and the barmaid. Dear, dear. Through the haze I recognized the self-respecting feature of my bank manager.

Under that steely glance my hopes of an overdraft shrank to a pin-head, and instead of returning to my office I made my way eastwards, through streets unknown to me. It was a sunny, dusty afternoon, burning hot. As soon as the bars were open again I continued my refresher course, and pushed my way to the limit of a poverty-ridden street market. The street was in hot shadow, though the sun, now low in the sky, was still blazing on the walls and windows of the

houses. I strolled between the stalls, in a smell of sweat and canvas, among the throng of married women to whom the bargains in this street means the difference between have and have not. At the end of the row I paused and turned round. A girl asked me if I was looking for any one.

'No,' I said.

'You want to be careful round this part,' she explained.

'Where do we go from here?' I asked, as if I had unlimited time.

'Anywhere you like.'

It was nearly dusk and we walked towards the lights of a cinema. The picture, *The Wizard of Oz*, was a good one. It entertained my companion, and my occasional asides and witty comments were superfluous.

When we came out the barrage balloons were still glistening over the huge squalor of London. The desolation seemed to be ultimate; to London, already despairingly poor and unjust, was added the threat of carnage and fire. One balloon, hideous and ungainly, was being pulled down to its moorings.

Somewhere over the rainbow,
Way up high,
There's a land that I heard of
Once in a lullaby.

The girl asked me when she would see me again.

'I don't live round here,' I said. The answer seemed to satisfy her, for she made no further inquiry, and after a pause, she said:

'I'm always there in the evenings. Always.'

'What time do you go to bed?' I asked.

'Ten,' she said. 'Mum locks me out if I'm not in by ten.'

Glancing up I saw the name Sussex Street, and was so surprised that I spoke the words aloud: 'Sussex Street.'

'What's up?' the girl asked.

'I know someone living here,' I said. I must have given the appearance of speaking the truth, because when I turned up the street she simply said: 'Well, so long, see you tomorrow,' and left me.

'So long,' I said.

No 17 Sussex Street was one of a row of attached houses. The door opened off the pavement without any area or window-box, and there were windows in three stories, blacked-out with brown paper. A chink of light showed on the ground floor. I banged the knocker. Getting no reply I knocked again, then pushed open the door, and went into the hall. On the right another door stood ajar, and I could hear movements within. There was a sour smell of human dirt. I rapped with my knuckles and a woman's voice, rasping, called:

'What d' you want?'

'Can I come in?' I said, and the remark sounded too refined.

The woman came to the door and opened it. She was fat and slatternly. Two small children, almost naked, held her wrists. Her blouse was undone, and I heard the muttering of the baby she had just been feeding.

'Well,' she said aggressively, 'who the bloody hell are you, coming knocking at honest folks?'

'My name 's Emprisson,' I said, 'could you tell me if . . .'

My manner cut no ice with her. 'What do you want, man?'

'Does a girl called Rose live here?'

'Young Rose? She 's gone.'

'Gone?'

'Yes, gone, I said. More than a week ago.'

'Where? Do you know?'

'I don't know.' The woman eyed my rakish hat and flushed face. 'And I wouldn't tell your sort if I did. Rose is a respectable girl.'

The interview was ended, as unmistakably as by any great lady.

'But . . .'

'You go to hell, go on.' The door was shut in my face.

There was just time to salve my wounded feelings before the bars closed, and I hurried as if my life depended on it. I was not the only one to snatch at a last chance of oblivion, and the final 'Time, gentlemen, please' found me on the mat with a little crowd of men and women, blinking with the self-confidence that was normally denied them, some talking, some singing, some listening with a sort of sizzling interest.

The group dispersed in twos and threes, and I hurried back to the corner where the little girl would be waiting 'always.' I looked anxiously for her cheerful face. She was not to be seen. I paced up and down, humming the tune we had heard:

Somewhere over the rainbow
Skies are blue,
And the dreams that you dare to
Dream really do come true.

I did not believe that she had gone home to bed, mum or no mum. I refused to believe it. My confidence ran high. Then doubts began to grow, cold doubts. Perhaps she had gone off with another fellow. A little piece like that, what else could I expect? The pretty tune ran on, and on in my head, with its American innocence, and as it ran my belief in this friendly world ebbed, slowly at first, then faster and faster.

The night air began to be chilly. I paced up and down restlessly, then began to ask myself what I was doing. Still I waited, for a little face.

She did not come. 'You have to be careful round these parts,' she had warned me. It was almost dark and the neighbourhood seemed to be deserted. It was no use waiting any longer.

I put my hand to my hip pocket. I blushed, and then a cold sweat broke out on my forehead. My note-case was gone. My hand flew to my ring finger. My ring was gone. I felt in my waistcoat pocket. My watch was gone, too, my gold watch, a present from my dad.

Somewhere over the rainbow
Blue birds fly,
Birds fly over the rainbow,
Why then, oh, why can't I?

I bolted for home. On the bus I realized that I had not enough money for my fare home. I jumped off, and walked, through London's midnight streets, mile after mile of them, unrelieved even by the artificial lights of peacetime. Every face a stranger to me, nowhere a word or a greeting or a smile, not a tree nor a friendly field nor a piece of grass to be seen, not a welcoming glow nor a kettle nor a cup of tea, only grey buses and uniformed men and preoccupied faceless strangers and street walkers in the city at the heart of the British Empire. A woman called out: 'Good night, dearie.' 'Good night,' I said, 'sweet dreams.'

Somewhere over the rainbow
Skies are blue,
And the dreams that you dare to
Dream really do come true.

CHAPTER VII

His Daughter

THE morning brought me, over my Eno's, a letter, dotted with dancing black spots, in the once familiar handwriting of my wife. It was an appeal for money on behalf of herself and our little daughter, then aged ten, of whom she had the custody.

There was no use in going into past squabbles, nothing to be gained by resurrecting the oscillating corpse of our incompatibility. With trembling hand I wrote:

DEAR UNA,

Enclosed you will find a cheque, which represents all I can spare at the moment. I hope that the bombs will continue to miss you and Trixie,

Yours ever,

PHIL.

Why had she called our daughter that? I had not at the time been against the name Beatrice, after Una's elder sister, but Trixie, that was another matter. My cheque was for one hundred pounds sterling (£100), and as I wrote it I remembered a similar payment by my father to my mother, also in response to an appeal. Women are all the same, I thought, differing only in method. One extracts painlessly, another uses a general anaesthetic, another goes right ahead. Sooner or later the patient discovers his losses.

It was Saturday, and I decided to take the day off. I gave Mrs. Evetts the letter to post. Little did she guess what was in it; if she had it would never have passed the slit unread.

There was a ring at the bell, and Mrs. Evetts rustled to the door. I heard a familiar childish voice. Trixie, my daughter, used to visit me alone once a month, as a matter of duty, usually on Saturday mornings when I was liable to be at home. Here she was.

I listened awhile to her exchanging pleasantries with Mrs. Evetts before dragging myself into the dining-room to greet her.

I saw at once that she had done something to her hair. There were ringlets where none had been before. She looked to me like a juvenile tap-dancer.

'Hallo, father.' She threw her thin arms round my neck and kissed my cheek.

'Hallo, Trixie. Did you bring your gas-mask?'

She showed me the tin.

'Why haven't you got it on?' I asked. To her my last question sounded ludicrous, and she gave me a silver ripple of laughter.

'Got it on? Oh, you are funny!'

'Funny?' I said, 'for heaven's sake, if you want to see someone funny this morning, go elsewhere. I am the opposite of funny.'

'What is that, father?'

'What is what?'

'The opposite of funny.'

'The Greeks had a word for it,' I said, suppressing a rising profanity. Trixie looked at me innocently, then round the room, hoping that she wouldn't have to go.

'How's your mother?' I went on. Your mother. This was a routine question, to which she gave a perfunctory answer.

'What shall we do, father?'

There was never anything for Trixie to do at my flat. I hoped that she might put forward an acceptable plan, but evidently she couldn't. My sole idea was to get out somewhere, anywhere, and at last I said:

'I want to go down to the office for a while. Would you like to come?'

She danced on one foot, then on the other, her eyes sparkled with pleasure, and her new ringlets shook.

'Ooo, I'd love to, thank you, father.'

'What the devil have you been doing to your hair?' I said.

Her lip trembled, and her big eyes filled with tears. I turned away from the spectacle and went to get my hat.

While we were on our way through the park the air-raid warning sounded.

'There's the siren, father,' Trixie said. She looked white, and suddenly very small and young.

'I wish you wouldn't call it "siren,"' I said. 'It's "siren."' The dismal wail rose and fell. We hurried towards a public shelter, as did most of the other people. There was very little sign of panic. At any moment senseless bombs might be tumbling among the crowds, shattering the tall buildings. The warning of sudden death went on and on, till we were all in our shelters, present and correct, like factory hands clocked in, in response to their hooters. We could hear the din of planes high overhead. Huns.

I felt a little drag at my hands, and someone said: 'Look out.' There was a slither, and Trixie fell to the floor.

'Give her air,' a voice said, 'poor little kid.'

She was in a faint, and I had to take her out of the shelter, where a warden attended to her. She was a little slip of a body, and her fine ringlets were covered in dust. She came round soon afterwards, and the all-clear sounded. Wondering who precisely had been blasted into the next world I took her to Lyons' Corner House and ordered some fried fish, a double whisky for myself, and a coffee for the child. Then she asked for and obtained a cream meringue, and by the time we had finished the war had receded, and the figure of Hitler had shrunk to the size of a small tubby man with a black moustache. After inflating so far beyond the normal he contracted on the rebound to a pin-head, in the simple harmonic rhythm of nature. Catch him in the small mood and what might not one do? He was out of reach, however, in Lyons' Corner House, and I accompanied my little daughter to Charing Cross station. There she looked so forlorn and battered that I decided to go down in the train with her as far as her station. Nothing would induce me to see her home. I would not meet my wife. I would *not*.

At the very idea of approaching Una spikes radiated from my chest, repelling her. I would rather fight a thousand battles with Hitler than face one encounter with Una. The blood rushed to my head and my breathing stopped when I

thought 'Una.' Una, Una, I thought, remembering tender passages, and mortification coursed through my body. 'We are incompatible,' I said aloud, 'or to put it another way, you are the pain in my neck.'

'What did you say, father?' Trixie asked. Her attention had been elsewhere.

'Oh, nothing,' I said, 'nothing.' I wondered whether they carried mail-bags on these suburban trains. If so, my hundred pounds for Una and Trixie might well be travelling in the guard's van. A fool and his money are soon parted, I thought, and speculating as to who the fool was, soon hit on the correct solution.

'I am a fool,' I said.

'What have you done? Lost the tickets?'

'No,' I said, 'I have *not* lost the tickets,' and felt in my waistcoat pocket. The curious thing was that I had lost them. I fumbled everywhere, and failing to find them bundled Trixie out at Beckenham station with money for her single fare. 'Pay at the barrier,' I said, 'good-bye, dear.' Good-bye, she waved.

I crossed the bridge and took the next train back to London. On the way up I found the tickets in another pocket.

It was 29th June. I remember the date well enough, and shall remember it to my dying day because of what happened in that train on the way up to London. Holding the tickets in my hand, my own third-class return to Beckenham and the unexpended portion of Trixie's half ticket, I was comparing them disparagingly with the tickets to Paris or Venice or Edinburgh that I might be handling but for the war, romantic journeys in imagination yet aimless in realization, when suddenly, sitting alone in that third-class compartment of a suburban electric train, I saw my way out. It came to me with a flash of certainty, and I could hardly believe that I had not thought of it before. I would go and live with

Una. We belonged to each other, we were man and wife. What was to stop me? I saw the simple course, irrespective of a thousand other considerations.

Una's point of view intruded. I pulled up the window by its leather thong and shut out the intruder. I knew that if I could preserve the simplicity of my decision I could conquer her objections. She had no option. In my excitement I sprang to my feet and paced up and down the swaying carriage. I grasped the racks and looked out. The back yards of hundreds of small houses flashed by me; their dustbins and washing rattled and flapped against the windows of the train. A bridge whipped by. We decelerated and drew into St. John's station.

I alighted calmly. I was composed enough to reflect that I was alighting, as instructed by the notice on the platform, instead of getting out in the ordinary way.

'When is the next train to Beckenham?' I asked a porter in a low voice, which did not betray the fact that I was about to take the most decisive step of my life.

'The other side for Beckenham. Over the bridge.'

'Yes, I know,' I said, 'but when is the next train?'

'Should be one any minute now. Over the bridge.'

'Should be one!' I said indignantly, 'of course there should be one. But when is it? Don't you know the times of the trains at your own station?'

The porter shrugged his shoulders and disappeared into the porters' room. The times of these uniform electric trains meant nothing to him. They were 'at frequent intervals,' and that sufficed. I tried to restore my faith in the railway by looking up a definite train on the time-table, but 'frequent intervals' dashed my hopes again, and I sauntered towards the footbridge. My resolution was so firm that I would not be shaken even by a quarter of an hour, even by twenty minutes' wait on St. John's station on a Saturday afternoon.

As I crossed the bridge my train crawled in like a mechanical worm. I ran down the steps and jumped into a carriage. The guard raised his hand and we were off. From my pocket I pulled out my return ticket to Beckenham and Trixie's unused portion. I threw my own return half out of the window. Trixie's ticket, which was unclipped, I kept like a good husband and father, for use on a future occasion, or for a refund of the money.

CHAPTER VIII

His Wife

ALTHOUGH I had never before been to Una's house, I could visualize it well enough from Trixie's description. Balmoral, 10 The Crescent, Beckenham, was the address. The Crescent, about a quarter of an hour's walk from the station, proved not unexpectedly to be a crescent-shaped road, with houses on either side, and Balmoral, or No. 10, whichever you preferred to call it, was a little way along on the right, standing with its semi-detached partner a little higher than the adjacent blocks.

On the side from which I approached it for the first time it showed a blank wall of two stories, judging by the overflow pipes from bathroom and lavatory. One of these pipes was running to greet me. There was an acacia-tree in the front garden. The front gate stuck, having fallen on its hinges. I pushed through and went up the front steps. The door opened as soon as I rang the bell, and Una stood in front of me, dressed for the street.

'Oh!' she said.

'I 've come back,' I said.

'What for?' As if I had left my umbrella or something.

'To live with you.'

Her heavy expression lightened.

'Er, board-residence, Mr. Empresson?'

'Bed and board,' I said.

'Come in, Phil,' she said, and took her hat off as I stepped across the threshold. 'I was just going out. A minute later and you would have found the house empty.'

'Did you get my letter?'

'No.'

Thank God, I thought. I felt that we were a hundred pounds to the good.

'Did Trixie get home safely?'

'No, I was getting a bit anxious about her.'

'What,' I shouted, 'not home! She should have been back an hour ago.'

Una and I had not exchanged a word for seven years, and here we were immediately plunged into a domestic crisis.

'Where did you see her last?' Una asked.

'At Beckenham station.'

'When?'

'More than an hour ago.'

Una's pallor touched me, and I said: 'I'll go and look for her.'

Just as I was setting off after this extremely brief homecoming, Trixie came running round the corner. She was obviously anxious to see her mother, and I was supernumerary. Una however put me at ease by saying: 'Where have you been all this time, Trixie?' in an annoyed voice. I was thus given the right of entry to their scene.

Trixie flushed. 'Why, you know I've been to see father.' She glanced at me indignantly.

'Yes, don't be silly, but what have you been doing since you left him at the station?'

'Oh, I met a friend.' She flounced her shoulders. I could see the growing opposition.

Friend, what friend? it was on the tip of my tongue to ask, but Una dropped the subject, and Trixie came off the defensive. I sympathized with the child more than I had hitherto. The great point of friends, I thought, is to keep them away from relations.

Una went out of the room, and I could hear her clanking about the kitchen, then hurrying upstairs to one of the bedrooms. Presumably she was making arrangements for my reception. Certainly she did not waste breath or words. She never had.

Trixie threw her coat and hat on the settee. 'Can I come and sit on your knee?' she asked.

'Yes, come on, Trixie,' I said affably.

She clambered on my striped trousers. 'Gwen said *The Wizard of Oz* was coming here. Can I go with her?'

'My goodness!' I said. The picture flashed to the screen behind my eyes, then my recent visit to it. To gain time I hummed *Over the Rainbow*. Trixie joined in, in her clear treble.

'Can I go?'

'No,' I said. 'I disapprove of children going to the pictures in wartime. Unless accompanied by an adult,' I added, to excuse myself.

'Oh, father, but Gwen's allowed to go.'

'So Gwen was the friend you met outside the station?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Why "of course"?''

'Well she is my friend now, you see.' She gripped my knee with her thighs, regardless of her underwear. 'Can't I go, please father?' she coaxed.

'You'll have to ask your mother,' I decreed. Trixie looked at me in surprise, and let herself down to the floor.

'You see,' she said, 'it's not a question of principle with me. It's a question of money. I simply haven't got the needful.'

'How much are the seats?'

'Sixpence.'

'Will you want to pay for two tickets or one?'

'Oh, only one. Gwen can pay for hers, of course.'

At that moment the gate opened and I saw the postman coming up the path. Trixie, as it happened, was looking the other way, or else she would have rushed to the door. The letter-box clicked. Una was still upstairs, and I went to the hall.

'What is it?' Trixie asked.

'A letter for me,' I said. This was not absolutely true.

'A letter from me,' I should have said. All the difference.

'What's in it, daddy?' she said enthusiastically, as I opened the envelope.

'A hundred pounds,' I said, smiling, as I tore the cheque into fragments.

'Go on, you old silly,' she said.

'Here's sixpence, Trixie,' I said, 'for the pictures.'

'Oh, thank you, father.'

Her eyes beamed with pleasure. So did mine, for I had netted £99 19s. 6d. on the deal.

'Phil,' Una's voice called me from upstairs.

'Yes.'

'Come and see if this will do.'

I went to her bedroom, and she showed me how she had re-arranged it. There was only a single bed, but a reasonably wide one. My old chest of drawers stood empty.

'You can put your clothes there,' she said.

'Fine.'

There was another air-raid warning as we went downstairs. That was the Saturday before the first big raid on Greater London. Goering must then have been personally planning and directing an assault on that vast and varied community, the citizens of London, on their soft bodies and their for the most part ugly property, large and small.

'Do they think we are ants?' I said to Una.

'Do who think?'

'The Nazis.'

'I don't know,' she said, characteristically. She had never been interested in politics.

Una had an Anderson shelter, and we went to it 'because of Trixie.' It was so uncomfortable, however, that we abandoned it before the all-clear. It certainly needed a man about the place to look after these things.

'We must get a man to see to it,' Una said.

'What does that make me?' I asked. I was only a business man.

Trixie went off to bed. The old argument between Una and me, which had seemed interminable and intolerable when we separated, lay dead between us, like a dead fish. All the glimmer and wriggle had gone out of it. Indeed we did not argue. Imperceptibly we approached each other.

That was the Saturday, too, when the people of Dover saw an extraordinary sight. An immense sea-serpent sprang out of the Channel, twisted itself into a coil, and hovered menacingly above the coast-line. It showed its fury by angry rotation, ever faster and faster, with its tail in its mouth and its trunk tied in knots. The spinning coil drifted inland and while the people watched burst into a sheet of flame and fell in a mass on the English countryside. I heard about it afterwards from one of the witnesses, my cousin Jack of all the prosaic people. His work had taken him to Dover during the war, and on the following Monday morning he called at Una's house on his way up to London.

I opened the door to him, much to his surprise. I saw from his face that he had been keeping a friendly eye on Una during my years of neglect.

'Come in, Jack,' I said.

Trixie ran out and threw her arms round his neck. He was obviously a great favourite with her.

Jack told me his Dover story nervously. 'An immense sea-serpent sprang out of the Channel, twisted itself into a coil, and hovered over the coast-line. . . .' His cheery voice could not adapt itself. I let him finish, and waited till we were alone. Still I did not speak, and he said:

'What's the score, Phil? With you and Una, I mean.'

'What's it got to do with you?' I said. I never discussed my private affairs with any one, and I was not going to begin with him. My coldness froze him off.

'All right, old man,' he said. 'As a matter of fact I had the idea that it might be better for Una and Trixie to quit London. It's likely to be a hot spot by all accounts. I thought my car might come in useful.'

'I am seeing to it,' I said, thus giving the impression that I had come down to arrange their evacuation, which was certainly not the case.

'That's right. Better get the kid out of here.'

I could see the romantic picture of Trixie in Jack's mind.

'I didn't say I was going to get them out of here,' I said.

Jack looked hard at me and said nothing.

'So mind your own bloody business,' I went on.

He flushed furiously, but I laughed and took his arm.

'No offence,' I said. 'Come and see Una, er, old man.'

As we went out of the room Trixie who was waiting for us in the hall ran up to him and claimed him. This eased him off a bit.

'How are Uncle Henry and Aunt Rachel?' I asked.

'Still in Nottingham.'

'Nottingham? Yes, of course.' I never associated them with Nottingham, because all the years I had lived with them, as one of the family, they had been in the south.

'I thought Una and Trixie might like to go somewhere round there,' Jack said. 'Mother would find rooms for them—in fact, she's offered to do so.'

'Oh, she has, has she?' I said, my temper rising again. 'Well, you know what she can do with her rooms.'

'Steady, old man,' Jack whispered, his hand on Trixie's shoulder.

This was getting past a joke. Was he now going to instruct me how to behave in front of my own child?

'You know what she can do with her rooms,' I said louder and more expressively.

'Yes, I know, I know,' Jack said. His temper was at breaking point. 'For heaven's sake dry up.'

'Take your hands off Trixie,' I shouted.

'What the hell!'

'Yes,' I said. 'Just you get a kid of your own. That's the best solution.'

Just as he was about to let fly I called up the stairs: 'Una, here's Cousin Jack.'

'I'm coming down,' she said.

'I thought you were going to say: "Tell him to come up as usual,"' I called.

She could not hear this remark, and said: 'What's that?'

'I said I thought you were going to tell him to come up as usual,' I shouted. Still she could not hear, and I refused to bawl my joke, if it could be so described, a third time. Jack didn't know how to take it.

When Una came down I watched the meeting intently. What I saw satisfied me.

'Jack,' I said, 'have a drink. That is if we've got anything. Have we, Una?'

'There's some whisky,' she said, 'will that do?'

'Will it do?'

'A bottle that Jack bought me,' she added.

'Tell me, Jack,' I said, pouring a little water into each of our drinks, 'have you heard from the parent body of late?'

Jack looked at me curiously. 'As a matter of fact, old

man, I heard you 'd been in Nottingham lately. Mother saw you there.'

'The devil she did!'

'Travelling incog., eh?' Jack winked.

Una stood by me then. 'Doesn't Mr. Bell live there?' she said. We all knew our family solicitor.

I was so grateful to Una that I said: 'We might do worse than move up there, Una. It's going to be hell let loose in this part of London one day.'

The air-raid anxiety lifted from her face. 'Let's go, Phil,' she said, 'let's go to-night?'

'What about your furniture?'

'I can shut this house up. I'll take everything we can get into our trunks. What about your things?'

'I lay no claim,' I said cautiously. 'I do not forget that I endowed you with all my worldly goods.'

'Yes,' she said impatiently, 'but what are you going to do? You must make a plan.'

'I don't see that I need,' I said, and whistled: 'Run rabbit, run rabbit, run, run, run.' The whistling got every one on their tin ears, including Jack, who was being left out of the execution of his own scheme. I did not even ask him for the address of the rooms he had come to talk about. Maybe it was hard on him, who for years had kept a friendly eye on Una and Trixie.

I would take them away, and I would write to Mrs. Evetts, telling her to go back and look after the Godmansterne house. It was where her heart was, I told myself, thinking how much I should dislike such a prospect myself. In a moment I was expecting her to be grateful to me, and in another moment I was receiving her grateful thanks—in my mind.

In my ears I heard Una's voice.

'Let's go, Phil,' she said again, and Trixie caught the current excitement.

The direct appeal would formerly have been enough to set me off in the opposite direction. But the human note in her voice, combined with the fact that I had just made up my mind independently, knocked me off my ten-year perch.

'Right,' I said, 'we 'll go.'

The plan of action seemed for the moment to arrest the threat from the Nazis a few miles away, as if merely to move were safer than to do nothing; so might a family of rabbits, hearing the dogs, change their hole rather than await the end at home.

CHAPTER IX

Evacuation

NOTTINGHAM and its quarter of a million souls gave me no civic welcome when I entered it by the L.M.S. station, accompanied by my wife and daughter. No flags were flying, no reception committee awaited us; on the other hand, no police officials tapped me on the shoulder. I was satisfied with the deal.

My inclination was to make for the hilly part of the town, and I hit on the idea of hiring a taxi and telling the driver to go uphill. This he did, and we soon left the railway and river behind us, with the castle on the summit of its rock (fine view), just as the guide book describes it, to our left. Almost a mile out of the town we were driving along a respectable road, green on one side with a row of Victorian houses on the other, tall and prosperous enough to qualify for Brighton front, when I happened to see a notice: 'Furnished Rooms to Let.' We stopped and made inquiries. The house with the notice had been converted into flats, the basement and ground floor making one, and the upper floor,

with attic above, another. The tenant of this upper flat wished to let off his attic rooms, self-contained except for bathroom and lavatory, which would have to be shared with him.

Outside, on the pavement, one could imagine crinolined women resting their hands on the arms of their tall-hatted, frock-coated escorts, and children in bonnets carrying parasols. But inside we were in 1940, talking of rations and air-raid shelters and black-outs.

'My husband and I always go down the basement when the sirens go,' the woman was saying. 'There's plenty of room for all down there.'

We surmised that we should have to sleep in the shelter rather than go down and up during the night.

'Yes,' she agreed, 'it's better. Especially where there's children. Mine have all left me long enough ago.'

'We've only got the one,' I said, indicating Trixie.

That night we slept in a corner of the basement, sharing the room with our upper-half landlords, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, landlords without land, and the occupants of the ground-floor flat. Despite the crowd we had a new sense of privacy. Una and I were in a camp bed, and Trixie was on a mattress on the floor beside us. There was a glimmer of light from a night-light, not enough to identify any one else. From time to time one of us moved and disturbed a shadow. I must have fallen fast asleep till I thought I heard Una calling out of a tunnel to me to join her. My own blackness enveloped me, and then suddenly I was outside the rim. My long dark struggle stretched behind me.

Una and I whispered together in faint whispers that could not have been heard a foot away. Trixie stirred under her blanket and sighed, but did not waken. From the far end of the room a sweet smell of stale alcohol, launched by Mr. Smith's snores, rolled towards us, heavy and furtive like a gas attack from trenches opposite. In the middle of the

room the family from the ground floor lay huddled in a jumble that might have been among the barbed wire and dug-outs of 1914-18. The drone of hostile aircraft died away. Una and I drew closer together, and the sirens outside wailed their confident 'all clear.' We slept safe, for the time being, from bombs hanging overhead, oblivious to the million dangers, the threats to life, that hover over us and circle round us every night, ready to pounce, compared with which the threats of Hitler are insignificant indeed. In the arms of the darkness we slept through the small hours till dawn broke and sent us upstairs to bed:

'Would you like a nice cup of tea?' Mrs. Smith whispered to Una in an early morning voice.

Una referred to me.

'We don't mind if we do,' I said as heartily as I could manage.

'We're great ones for tea,' Mrs. Smith went on. 'And for Mr. Smith, it's tea, tea, tea, in the morning.'

I could well believe that tea might be Mr. Smith's life-saver. His face looked light blue in the dawn, like distant hills under stubble.

'How did you sleep?' I ventured to ask him.

'What?' he said, 'what's that?'

'Mr. Smith is deaf,' his wife explained.

'How did you sleep?' I shouted in his ear, shattering the early morning.

'Sleep?' he said. 'I didn't sleep. I very rarely do.'

'Oh, I see,' I said, 'you're independent of it.'

'That's right. Excuse me, Mr. Er . . ., will you? I want to go in there.'

I waited for him while the ladies and Trixie went ahead.

'That's better,' he said, 'now I can talk. Though I don't as a rule talk in the a.m.s. Can't as a rule, that's a fact,' he concluded gloomily.

'That suits me,' I said.

A ghost of a smile twitched on Mr. Smith's blue lips, and for a moment he looked at me as if I were a human being. He led the way upstairs. Thin long hairs, growing precariously, straggled back over his head and disappeared behind the neck of his dressing-gown. He held himself erect, as if clinging to some retired martial self-respect. Feeling great sympathy for him I said:

'What do you take when you can't sleep?'

He did not hear the question, and I had to catch him up and repeat it.

'White Horse,' he said. 'Always White Horse. With water. It's a golden rule with me.'

'A golden rule all right,' I said, 'at sixteen shillings a bottle.'

'And why shouldn't I?' he said. 'I've got the money. Why shouldn't I? It's the only indulgence I allow myself. I can afford it. I never spend a penny on myself. I don't go out, I don't smoke, I don't bet, I never buy clothes. . . .'

'Quite,' I said, estimating his White Horses at £100 a year minimum.

'It's a very modest little self-indulgence.'

'Very modest,' I said, 'definitely.'

'My wife has the use of the rest of her money. Of our money I should say.'

'Of course.'

We joined the ladies for tea. Una had a delicate flush. Her teeth, I noticed, were a miracle of modern engineering compared with Mrs. Smith's approximations. By 6 a.m. we were in our attic again.

'What do you make of the Smiss?' I asked.

'What, dear?'

'Of the Smiths,' I repeated, making my first attempt of the day to articulate.

'She's very kind.'

'He's a real soak,' I said.

'What's a soak, father?' Trixie asked.

'A sponge,' I said.

Trixie laughed. Perhaps she visualized a rubber sponge with legs. In spite of all this merriment I wanted to go to bed for an hour or two, and so did Una apparently. Not so Trixie. She was all agog. The problem of what to do with her was exercising me when Una said: 'Trixie, you can go out for a bit if you like. You've got to amuse yourself.'

Trixie appeared to make the decision on her own.

'I think I'll go out, mother,' she said.

'Put your coat on then, and be back by eight.'

I was very impressed by this sign of good upbringing and truly grateful to Una. I could not have brought it off.

Trixie looked very young and eager, setting off on her expedition into the unknown. 'Well, I'm damned,' I said, when she had gone. 'What on earth will the child do with herself?'

'Oh, she'll be all right,' Una said.

'Yes, but what will she *do*?' I asked, trying to imagine. 'What will she actually do with the resources at her disposal? How occupy her mind?'

'You'd better go to sleep,' Una said indulgently. 'How can you imagine what people will do?'

Released from this futile exercise I let Trixie go in my mind, and was soon asleep myself. When I woke again the sun was shining, Trixie's voice was chirruping about the flat, Una was not beside me, and there was a smell of breakfast cooking.

I felt at home. At home in the real sense, not in that romantic sense of being in a spiritual home, nor at home with nature on a desolate sea coast where promontories run out, the green woods and grass ending abruptly in the blue line of the sea; nor at home like an isolated fir-tree on the headland, its roots banked against wind and weather, and its

branches overhanging the shallow water at high tide and tongues of sand at low tide; not at one with that seascape where the flat stones stare upwards; not at home on the mountain road that climbs the pass between bare rocks and stone-strewn hillsides, where no animals graze and no man treads except the climber, bound for distant snow; but at home and alive in the ordinary sense.

I smelt the bacon, and my little party of three seemed to have emerged from the tunnel of the night like a car-load at a fair who have ridden the ghost train, through clammy caverns and beside dark brooks, under wisps and glowing spectres and nodding heads, past screaming horrors, meant to frighten but not much for threepence each, and who emerge from the ordeals clinging close together, as a pretence, perhaps, even as a joke, but actually close together, drawn closer by the artificial thread of that shared experience.

The thread of our night was not artificial; it was real; and with a sense of its reality, instead of continuing to indulge in the spurious activity of lying in bed and recapitulating the night or planning the day ahead, under the delusion of thinking out the problems, I put my feet on the floor. The new day assimilated me.

CHAPTER X

Estate Real and Personal

It was a nice day, with a hint of cold underneath the summer. Leaves were beginning to turn here and there, like those occasional grey hairs that appear prematurely long before greyness sets in with a vengeance.

'I must go early, or you must, Phil, to see about our ration books.'

'Yes, indeed,' I said. 'Let's all go. Or rather, let us sally forth.'

On our way down the hill to the food office I saw Mr. Bell on the other side of the road waiting at a bus-stop. We trooped across the street, and I greeted him. He was carrying an umbrella in one hand and an attaché case in the other. He smelled of eau-de-Cologne, and his morning appearance was business-like and cheerful, his dark hat and overcoat were well brushed, his eyes clear. He stood firmly, a square peg in the square hole of the law.

'Hallo, er, Empresson, how do you do? This is indeed a pleasure.' He shook my hand, then turning his gaze calmly on Una: 'Er, I don't think we have the pleasure, have we?'

'This is my wife. Una, you've heard of Mr. Bell, of course.'

His face was a study in conflicting ideas. He knew that I had been separated from my wife for years, and as far as I was aware had always assumed that the right was on my side. In fact, he had taken part in the dispositions. Then at our last meeting he seemed to have jumped to the conclusion that I had a new affair, and was about to institute legal proceedings. Now I faced him with Una, apparently on good terms with her, and I could see that he thought at first that this was a new wife, and was rapidly weighing up the legal situation.

'And this young person?' he beamed, leering a little at Trixie, as men often did.

'This is Trixie,' I said.

He gazed at her in perplexity. The family likeness to my father was so obvious that it went home to him with a bang, and he hurriedly adjusted his ground.

'Well, well,' he said. 'Una, of course. Una Empresson. Dear me. Dear me. And Trixie—such a big little girl. A very remarkable likeness to your grandfather, my dear.' He put his hand on her sloping shoulder.

Una said nothing. I was hoping that she would 'make conversation' for once, but it was not easy for her, because from the very first I had shut her out of our family affairs, of which Mr. Bell was the repository. Indeed she knew nothing at all about what seemed to him the engrossing details of our estate. Perhaps it was as well she did not, because of Bell's next remark, addressed to me.

'Did you get my telegram?'

'No?' I said inquiringly.

'You did not? That is very strange. I couldn't imagine what had happened.'

'I've had nothing from you,' I said. 'I've been away from home. From my London address,' I corrected myself.

'But wasn't it sent on to you?' There was no place for such irregularities in Mr. Bell's world.

'What was in it?' I asked irritably. I could not see the point of this inquest.

'I wired that I wanted to see you at once on an urgent matter. In fact, I was prepared to come to London specially.'

Una made her first contribution then, and I must say it was well-timed.

'Trixie and I will go on,' she said. 'Then you and Mr. Bell can have a talk.'

Bell appeared to assent. 'Right,' I said, 'as you say.'

'Good-bye, Mr. Bell.' Una shook his hand. 'Come along, Trixie.'

'Good-bye, er, Mrs. Empresson, good-bye,' he said. 'So pleased to have met you at last. And good-bye, Trixie, good-bye—little girl.'

'So long,' I said to them, 'see you later.'

As soon as we were alone together, Bell took my arm, and we strolled down the hill towards his office. A casual observer would have said that we were bosom friends. I

could see that Bell was about to break news, but he temporized.

'Your movements are very baffling, Empresson. Very baffling.'

'Yes, yes,' I said. I did not want to discuss Una. 'What is your news?'

He took the hint, and spoke straight enough then. 'It concerns your father's will. As you know there were certain facts which I was not in a position to put before you when we last met, facts of which your father advised me on his visit to Nottingham. By the way, the probate is not through yet. Now I have received a communication, from the solicitors of one Smallwood, the Reverend Smallwood of Godmansterne, making a claim on the estate which will alter the whole position.

'How much?' I asked.

'Five thousand pounds.'

'What is their case?'

'A good one and a dangerous one, Empresson. I do not like it. Naturally there's a woman in it; your father was always weak with women. He was putty in their hands.'

I was floundering immediately.

'Do you dare to suggest that my mother handled him?'

'Nonsense, Empresson. I said nothing about your mother. There were many other women in your father's life.'

'What!' I shouted. 'I don't believe it.'

Bell was amazed now, and he reddened a little, a very unusual symptom in him.

'Then what do you suppose your father did after your mother's death?'

'I refuse to listen to you.' I shut my ears and gritted my teeth.

Bell recovered his equanimity and said smoothly: 'It may not be as bad as it looks. The Smallwoods, the Reverend Smallwood and his sister . . .'

'The two-faced bitch!'

'The Smallwoods have a document under which that sum is given to a charity of which they are the trustees.'

'What charity?'

'It appears to be a sort of rest home.'

'Who for?'

'For ladies in reduced circumstances.'

An imaginary group of gentlewomen, modestly dressed, refined of speech, tall, short, dark, fair, but all thin, throwing their social weight about in the gentlest way on my money, blinded my vision with fury. My money—though I knew in my heart that it was not my money, never had been, and never would be. My money, my business independence, the source of my authority. I began to fight them single-handed, and my temper rose to the task. I restrained myself with difficulty.

'My poor old dad,' I said. 'What can have bitten him? Was he softening, Bell?'

'If you could prove that your case would be won.'

'But was he, Bell? I ask you.'

'My dear boy, on the contrary. He could not resist them—the ladies, I mean. He was like a youngster.'

You dirty swine, I thought, but said nothing. I merely glanced at him out of the sides of my eyes.

'I shall have to discuss this with my wife,' I said.

'Naturally.'

'With Una. Her livelihood and Trixie's are at stake.'

'Quite.'

'Well, good-bye, Bell.'

'Good-bye, my dear fellow, good-bye. We shall be meeting again, then?'

'I'll call you up.'

I left him to pursue his way to the town and turned up my hill again. I began to think about the human being whose money I had always assumed, as a matter of course,

to be mine, and who now, in the first few months of his death, was beginning to show me his mettle. The money I wrote off in my mind at once. I was a quick despairee, and for me it was gone. Already, while talking to Bell, I had reorganized my standard of living. But what sort of man was he who had pulled the reins so sharply with his dead hand? Was he my friend or my enemy? I tried to conjure up my father's expression as he watched my reaction. Was that smile indulgent or cruel? I could not tell.

There was, however, one person who could tell me, or who could give me a shrewd idea. That was Una. Una and Una's family must have known a great deal about my father, and about my mother, too, for that matter, in the early days when they lived in New York, probably more than I did myself. And I had never invited her, perhaps I should say never allowed her, to say a word about my family. Similarly I never referred to Una's parents; there was a memory of mine buried in the Hopkins family that nothing would induce me to discuss with a living soul, least of all with Una. So, during the year of our married life, the subject of our in-laws became taboo between us, to be referred to only at the risk of an explosion, which threatened to become more and more violent as time went on.

Well, Una must speak at last. The subject had forced itself on us. And I must hear what she had to say, explosion or no explosion.

Despite my resolve it was October before I managed to speak to Una, October 1940, with the gales blowing the leaves and the sunlight losing its power. The fields round Nottingham were a light brown after the long drought, and interspersed among them were the winter greens, evidence of sanity in a world gone mad. The trees, the near green and the far blue and the turncoats, stood for England of before the war.

Una made a remark about the sumach-trees in the fall. Her words summoned the autumns of my childhood, the smell of the bonfires and the fallen leaves and the mist and chill of the American champagne air. I was a boy again, out to tea with the Hopkinses, in their apartment, all of us 'foreigners' in New York, outdoing the British themselves in the conventionality of our currant buns and five-o'clock tea.

'My goodness!' I said, 'I used to think your mother was a paragon. I worshipped the ground she trod. Her gestures, motions, and her smile. Little did I think she was qualifying to be my mother-in-law.'

Una refused the bait, kept her temper, and a pause brought the conversation to its true theme, the theme that had been dangling between us all these weeks.

'There 's one thing I always remember about your father,' she said.

'What 's that?'

'Every time he came to see us he gave us twenty-five cents all round.'

'What,' I said, 'my father! The old devil, he never gave us anything. Well, I 'm damned. The old snob. . . .'

I tried to think why he 'd do it. The Hopkinses were much richer than we were then. Why should my father buy cheap popularity like that with the Hopkins kids? I eased off in my mind. Perhaps I was criticizing the old man too harshly.

'What would he carry on like that for?' I grumbled. 'What had you kids to do with him?'

'To do with him! You haven't forgotten Beatrice. . . .'

I had forgotten Beatrice. As a matter of fact I had never seen much of her. Beatrice was Una's elder sister. She used to stay at home and look after my father during those long holidays when we first got to know the Hopkins children.

'Was there anything between my father and Beatrice, Una?'

'I'll say there was.'

'A real affair?'

Una shrugged her shoulders. 'It was a standing joke in the family.'

'My father seems to have made a pretty fair idiot of himself with the Hopkinses. Eh?'

'Perhaps he saw in us,' Una said without malice, 'some quality that he could not find in his own children.'

I lapsed into silence, and put my head in my hands, conjuring up the appearance of the Hopkins family as I remembered them. Dr. Hopkins, unlike my father, gave the impression of being a very unprejudiced and open-minded man. Had he been born a few decades later he might have been a psychologist; as it was, he had been a successful general practitioner, paying particular attention to the emotional symptoms of his patients. He invited confidences from men and women, especially from young ones, and I remember my boyhood impression of his modernity, and thinking how nice it must be for his family to have such a sensible and understanding person about the place. Mrs. Hopkins, with whom he seemed to be on the best of terms, was one of those worn-looking, earnest, unselfish American women who devote their energy to practical helpfulness. She too was 'modern' and understanding, and in this atmosphere of enlightenment the three Hopkins children were brought up.

In the early days, when we first met them, Beatrice was about fifteen, Robert a year or two younger, and Una, the baby of the family, perhaps five or so. Beatrice and Robert were very grown-up and free in their manners, and were vivacious and charming and generally popular; Una was a pretty little girl.

Then, a year or two later Robert was lost. I was with

him at the time. I was very fond of climbing around the quayside at a spot where they used to hold a regatta during our summer holidays. There were ladders down the seawall, and ropes and swinging masts, and all sorts of attractions. One afternoon I was scrambling about, amusing myself; there was no one else about at the time except Robert, who was following me in a careless and superior way, owing to his relatively great age. On one of the fixed ladders he lost hold and fell into sheer water. He was dressed in blue, and his body disappeared beneath the splash.

The tide was half in, and I suppose he fell into six or seven feet of dirty water. I waited for him to come up. He did not.

Even then it did not occur to me that he was hurt, and I stood on my perch looking at the place where the splash had been. Nothing happened. A clock struck three. Still nothing.

At last I raced to the top of the ladder and clambered on the quay.

'Help!' I called. 'Help, help, help!' My voice was shrill. 'Help!' I screamed with all my strength. At last a head came out of a window, and soon men were round me asking me what it was about.

I tried to explain. I told them. They didn't understand. I told them again and again. 'There,' I sobbed, 'there,' pointing at the place in the water.

I was about ten then, and they didn't take me seriously. Only when I reached home and saw Mrs. Hopkins and poured out my story did I realize the scale of the disaster. Her whole being leapt into action, her calmness gone, her poise thrown away. She rushed to the little harbour and out of my sight. What happened thereafter I never knew; I never dared to ask. I do not even know whether they found him or not. For me he has remained a falling body, a splash, and then silence.

Characteristically the Hopkinses never made any difference in their manner to me. They were kindness itself, and for several years afterwards, until I left for England, I was treated as one of the family. No word of reproach was ever spoken to me, and if Robert was mentioned in my presence it was the Robert I used to know. Una was too young to understand then. Did they tell her later? I do not know. I had never asked her. Did she remember Robert? I do not know. I had never asked her. But I remembered Mrs. Hopkins's kindness and forbearance.

'What are you thinking?' Una asked, taking me by surprise.

I blurted it out, the name that had never before been mentioned between us. 'Your brother Robert.'

The corners of Una's mouth drooped, and tears ran into her eyes. Una, usually so self-contained, so unemotional, burst into a flood of weeping, and allowed her head to fall on her arms, among the socks and darning wool.

Trixie was frightened. 'Run along to the bedroom a minute,' I said, 'there's a good girl. Mother's all right. Run along.' I pushed her out of the room and went over to Una.

'Una,' I said, 'what is it?'

She lifted her head. In the tear-stained face I saw the girl, the seventeen-year-old Una I had married ten years ago.

'Have you forgiven me?' I said, 'have you forgiven me for what happened to Robert?'

'Poor Phil,' she said softly, 'there was nothing to forgive. How could you help it?—it was not your fault. But mother did not forgive you. She never will.'

'What,' I said, astounded, 'your mother! But she was sweetness itself to me.'

'She loathed and detested you, Phil. And she still does.'

The implications of this remark dawned on me gradually.

For one thing it meant that Una, at the age of seventeen, had married me in the face of her mother's opposition.

'So that I have the conventional mother-in-law of stage and fable?' I said.

'You certainly have, Phil.'

And I had thought that Una was foisted on me by her mother, with mine aiding and abetting.

For another thing, it meant that I could be completely deceived by human behaviour. My spirits rose.

'Not that I can blame her.'

'I should hope not!' Una said indignantly.

I suppressed the familiar irritation, and returned to the subject of Una's sister.

'What became of Beatrice?' I asked.

'The affair drifted on. Then your father came to England.'

'Had he others besides Beatrice in tow?'

'I had that impression.'

'Who?'

'Oh, it's all talk, Phil. I'd rather not pass on the old gossip, now that he's gone; what's it got to do with me anyway?'

'It has very much to do with you. And why? Because my father's fortune, left to me, is being jerked out of my hands, out of our hands I might say, by one of these hussies, Camilla Smallwood by name. Do you know her?'

To my surprise Una looked pleased and amused.

'Why are you smiling?' I asked.

'Because you said out of "our" hands.'

There was no accounting for women, I thought, and their astonishing mixture of candour and duplicity.

'It's serious,' I went on. 'The greater part of our inheritance.'

Una thought for a moment. 'I'll tell you who could help you probably.'

'Who?'

'Beatrice.'

'Oh, yes, Beatrice! And I'm to get permission to cross the Atlantic to see your sister.'

'She's in England. She came over here to see your father.'

'What?' I shouted. 'Beatrice in England? I don't believe it.' As I spoke, in a flush of recollection, I remembered a little woman at the back of the church on the occasion of my father's funeral, a little middle-aged woman, weeping. She was carefully and expensively dressed, but the result was not particularly successful. Could that have been Beatrice? In my heart I knew that it was.

'She came over four or five years ago.'

I could hardly believe my ears. The gaps in my knowledge were incredible.

'Does nobody tell me anything? Do you realize that I was living with my father, housekeeping for him, you might say, and he told me nothing about this visit? Do you realize that, Una?'

Una's reaction was not what I expected. 'It doesn't seem odd to me.'

'Not odd that I should be seeing my father every week and he say nothing about his horrible little affairs with . . . my sister-in-law?'

'Not at all odd. On the contrary, why should he tell you about his affairs? They were nothing to do with you.'

I looked at Una with a new eye, as a person of spirit, not my property. I saw myself relieved of a burden. Nevertheless I rose angrily to my feet and left the room. Was it a laugh I intercepted as I closed the door behind me?

CHAPTER XI

A Message from the Grave

ON the stairs I met Mr. Smith.

'Hallo,' I said.

'Good morning,' he said, gloomily.

'Out for a constitutional?' I asked.

He nodded. 'What time is it?'

'Just on eleven.'

It might seem strange that he should go out for a drink, seeing that his sideboard was stocked with his favourite brand of whisky. But he was still susceptible to that conscience-soothing lure of 'going out,' when he might or (so the tempter argued) might not 'have one,' whereas if he went to the cupboard at home and took the cork out of the bottle, there was no doubt about the outcome.

We went out together, into the fresh air. 'Did you hear them over last night?' Mr. Smith asked.

'I thought I heard a sort of rattling and groaning.'

'That was them. They may descend on us any minute.'

For the descent I saw in his mind a huge chute, let down at a steep angle with the creaking and groaning we had heard the night before. 'They,' the German hordes, would come sliding down this broad band, helter-skelter, with their ludicrous uniforms and weapons.

'But we 'll fool them,' I said aloud. I felt it my duty, as a member of the Home Guard, to take this view.

'How?' Mr. Smith inquired. I could appreciate his agonizing need of a drink, and allowed his footsteps to guide us both in the customary direction.

'Oh,' I said airily, 'we 'll demolish the last hundred feet of their slipway and they 'll crash to death in their thousands.'

Mr. Smith turned an anxious glance on me. 'What?' he said.

'When they descend on us,' I explained. I could see his mind trying to imagine the construction and workmanship of such a ladder, plunging from the Nazi heaven, with Hitler frowning and worried, surrounded and overtopped by his blond angels, to our Anglo-Jewish Bolshevik hell on earth. The structure would be of the greatest ingenuity, worthy of 'their' gift for detail, and the balustrade and handrail would be decorated with a million replicas of Goering's ideal nude, that model of respectability, free of 'evil thoughts.'

'Oh, I see your idea,' Mr. Smith said at last. 'Damn funny. Sort of Gadarene ladder.'

'Yes,' I said, 'the swine.'

'What time is it now?'

I pulled out my watch for the sake of accuracy.

'11.17,' I said.

'No, it's just gone twenty past. I saw it on the town hall clock in the distance.'

'Then why the hell did you ask me?' I said, pushing back my half-hunter indignantly. He must have been counting the minutes till opening time, 11.30 in that district.

'Well,' he said, 'they haven't come yet, after all. They haven't descended on us. . . .'

The siren blew up, and I thought I had better go back to Una. I said so.

'Right, old man,' Mr. Smith said, 'I'll go a step or two farther. Just a step. I shan't be long. His tongue was hanging out. No engine of war yet devised could have deflected his course.'

'Right,' I said, 'cheerio.'

He went on alone to his Mecca, the saloon bar, which would be empty at that time in the morning, and smelling of stale cigarette smoke; there he would have an inadequate

tot of whisky at a fancy price, then another, then home to the bottle waiting on the sideboard.

There had been light showers in the night, and the roads and pavements gleamed with new rain. On my way home I heard the all-clear, and changed direction for the open country. I was soon in sight of trees and fields.

It was a sunny morning, thinly veiled by wisps and tongues of cloud. The leaves were turning fast, and most of the small trees were either ablaze or bare of leaves. Only the elms still showed green, as if more conservative by nature and less easily swayed by the prevailing fashions. Similarly in the spring they would stand gaunt and immovable long after the others had run up their colours. Although I had intended to think out my father's affairs, in the hope of deciding what to do about our money, I could not keep my mind to the point. Other subjects, any other subject indeed, would gain admittance immediately on knocking, but my father had only to put his head through my window to vanish instantly. Finding him so elusive I abandoned my attempts to pin him down, and lengthened my stride, swinging my arms and breathing in deep draughts of the sweet washed air.

I had been walking for a mile, perhaps, and was still in the fringe of the suburbs, when I felt a touch on my shoulder. I was greatly surprised, having heard no footsteps behind me—moreover I was walking fast at some four and a half miles an hour—and I turned round sharply, resenting the familiarity.

There was no one there.

Along the road ahead a milkman was delivering something (milk I hazarded, at a brilliant guess), to a detached house of the £1,050 and every modern convenience variety. He shut the gate behind him, a new gate in a brand-new chestnut fence. Behind me, some fifty yards away, on the other side of the road, a little cavalcade, consisting of a

woman, a toddler, and a pram, were advancing in my direction. A dog barked.

I had gone only a few hundred yards farther, just far enough to clear the last of the houses, when I again felt a touch on my shoulder. Again I turned.

There was no one there.

The little cavalcade had receded almost out of sight. I could still recognize them as a group. The milkman and his cart were gone. The road now ran between fields, hedged and wired. With one hand I grasped the side-piece of a pram myself, and gazed up to an ageless feminine presence, tall and dressed in black in high-necked fashion, her face far above me like a distant mountain peak. Ahead the road became more and more countrified, the sun brighter, the fields greener. Time changed its value and stretched ahead of me interminably. A lark rose and sang.

I slipped my hold on the pram, escaped the feminine presence, and dodged through a hedge across a convex meadow in which cows were grazing. On the other side of the meadow I was hidden from the world of passers by. I felt secluded. Without any effort on my part my father and his affairs dropped into my mind and stayed there.

'Hallo, dad,' I said.

He smiled, and was obviously relieved to find me in a genial mood.

'Hallo, son.'

'What's all this about?' I asked. 'What have you been doing with your money, you old reprobate? And what do you want done with it now you're dead?'

'It's a long story, Phil.' He spoke anxiously, as if afraid of offending me.

'Don't let that worry you,' I said airily. 'My time is at your disposal.'

'If I tell you, Phil, will you listen? As far as I can make out my stories used to go in at one ear and out at the other.'

'They were so long-winded, and always the same old story.'

'Maybe, but you never listened. If you had done so once, Phil, just once, I would have let you off.'

The justice of this reproof moved me to say: 'I'm sorry, father, what was your story?'

He laughed. 'Polite as always. You wouldn't be interested, Phil. You have your own affairs, so involved and so important to you. Mine were equally involved and equally important—to me.'

'So I gather,' I said.

'Are you looking after yourself properly, Phil?' The voice was kind, with a suggestion of uplift.

'What do you mean, exactly?' I asked, blushing.

'Are you going easy on the whisky?'

The words were so kindly said that I could not be seriously annoyed, though I felt my temper rising. I was about to make a hard retort when I remembered that the old man was dead. Needless to say, I never had any such talk with him in his lifetime.

'Oh, lay off, dad. I can look after myself.'

He was obviously sure that I couldn't—that will never alter, I thought to myself—but instead of pursuing the subject, he said:

'Will you deliver a message for me, Phil?'

'To mother?' I asked automatically, as I must have done so often, long ago.

'No, not to your mother. No need for that now, thank God. To Beatrice.'

'O.K. What do I say? A message from the grave for Beatrice?'

'If you like.'

'And what is the message?'

'Tell her that . . .'

I strained my ears. I was about to learn a great secret.

I was about to hear the solution to the problem of extra-marital relationship. The words rang in my ears in my father's strong and resonant voice. But I could not hold them. My father's presence faded, and with him went his words, like the lost chord, leaving only in my mind the actual last words, the last words of his lifetime that I had heard him murmur in a weak voice as I stood by his bed, 'tell her that he's the image of Sammy Blundel.'

That night I lay awake until early morning, listening to a patter of raindrops on the window-pane. The weather had turned so wet in the evening that we had decided not to go down to the shelter, and were sleeping in our bedroom. I could hear Una's breathing.

I must have fallen asleep, because Una woke me to ask what I was going on about.

'Did I speak?' I asked.

'Yes, you said: "Tell her that he's the image of Sammy Blundel."'

'Oh!'

Her next words surprised me into wakefulness.

'I knew a Sammy Blundel.'

'My goodness!' I said. 'And I didn't.'

'Yes. He was my professor when I was at college. As a matter of fact, they used to say that he had a bit of a crush on your mother.'

'Who said?'

'So the story went. Anyway he never married.'

'And was the—er—crush reciprocated.'

She laughed as pleasantly as one can at four o'clock in the morning.

'I don't suppose so for a moment.'

'I wouldn't be so certain,' I said. 'They usually are.'

'Is that your experience?' she said.

I didn't know which way to take that, so I said: 'You

have to take things as you find them. I would go further and say that it is wrong to ignore these situations—they are rare enough in life. . . .’

My voice dwindled off. What in heaven’s name I was doing, holding forth at dead of night, I could not imagine. A procession of Canterbury tales filed past me, a thousand abortive agitations, a thousand seemingly endless remorsees.

Una was not taken in. ‘You want it both ways,’ she said.

We slept until Trixie roused us.

As soon as I was awake I began to run through the coming day’s activities, each of which could be either yes or no. The body, laid out and pinned down under a pitiless early morning light, could thus be subjected to a ruthless and agonizing examination. No cries for mercy would avail. A plan for making amends, for doing better in the day to come, might be offered in the hope of mitigation of sentence, but it would not avail. It would not avail, because the proposed ‘amends,’ examined coldly, would not amount to anything. In the same way, a balance sheet scrutinized for favourable tendencies by business men does not cut any ice if it fails to show a profit. Unprofitableness damns the whole concern.

At this point in my reflection I got out of bed, put on the kettle, the large kettle, for tea and shaving water, removed the black-outs, mixed the porridge oats, and brushed my hair. By the time Una was up I was almost capable of speech.

‘How did you sleep?’ I asked. My mouth unstuck with a little bang.

‘Very well. And you?’

‘Not so well. I was awake on and off till four. Then I must have dozed off for a few minutes. A cat-nap.’

‘Some cat.’

‘By the way, Una,’ I asked, ‘when and where can I see Beatrice?’

'Beatrice? What's the hurry?'

'I have a message for her.'

'Who from?'

'From my father.' Una looked at me as if I had really gone off my head at last. 'Well, not exactly a message from him. But I want to see her—on urgent family affairs.'

'All right, Phil,' Una said, when she saw that I meant it. 'I'll fix it for you.'

CHAPTER XII

Una Meets the Family

THE prospect which had so agitated me in bed, as well it might, was our visit to Uncle Henry and Aunt Rachel, which could be delayed no longer. A few months before, at my father's funeral, they had seen me a bachelor to all intents, and my marriage, evidently a dead failure, was not even mentioned between us. Their next sight of me was to be of the family man, the husband and father.

Aunt Rachel would have been my natural confidante in my time of trouble. She had steered me through the difficult years after my mother's death, until I was my own master. Yet when I brought Una, my bride, back to England from New York, I forbade her to visit my family. I did not even pay Aunt Rachel the compliment of letting her know that I was married. She had to find that out for herself. And when my incipient quarrel with Una culminated in our separation, I left Una and Trixie to look after themselves, without a helping hand from my side of the family.

Naturally I assumed that Una would return to her family in New York. It never occurred to me that she could do

anything else. But I was quite wrong. She had other ideas, and the pluck to see them through. She stayed in England on the money I allowed her, for months, then for years. I believe that she saw my father occasionally. That I could not prevent. Beyond that she took help from no one, except Jack, apparently.

So it was with feelings of acute embarrassment that I led my troupe up Aunt Rachel's drive, while the heavy gate of her front garden swung behind us. I was leading. Behind me came Trixie, running to keep up with me, and behind her Una, flushed from the fast walking. The front room of the Drurys' house had large windows overlooking the drive, and behind the glass I saw my aunt sitting in such a position that she could see any one who came in. She always used to do this when we were children, and would come to the front door to greet us. What she must have thought when she saw us in her garden I cannot guess, but she came to the front door and welcomed me as warmly as she had always done in the past; so that on her well-whitened step I was able to present first my daughter, who happened to be the nearer, then my wife.

To go into the large rooms, furnished with the pieces I had known as a schoolboy, to recognize once again the stable order in which I had been brought up to believe, was to slip back through a generation. We all went into the drawing-room, where a freshly lit fire was burning, and sat down on chairs and sofas far enough apart to allow that feeling of individuality and privilege which is the basis of the old order. If hard or dirty work was done in that house, there was no sign of it. We had not been expected, and only my aunt and uncle and Millicent were living in the house, yet when the gong sounded half an hour later there was a lunch of white fish, followed by leg of lamb, then a trifle, served by a parlour-maid in uniform.

On our way to the dining-room I saw Millicent looking

at me intently. She wore a curious expression which I could not interpret. I lagged behind, and the instant the others were out of sight she ran to me and took my hand in hers. Her eyes filled with tears and she said nothing. In spite of myself my own tears rose, and for a moment we mourned my father together.

The passion she put into the gesture made me look at her closely. She was young for her age. Her hair was wispy, and she gave the impression of being careless of her appearance, yet her general effect was striking, with her delicate complexion and high colour. Her manner was very free, and her personality clear cut. She seemed to be able to function, at any rate at that moment, on a plane other than our ordinary earthly one.

I found no words for her, and a moment later she let go my hand and we joined the others. Trixie was making great progress with Uncle Henry. It would not be too much to say that she was 'getting off' with him, an achievement which might have a considerable effect on the future. She took no notice of his downright rudeness and awkward silences, and this pleased him so much that he played up to her, while outwardly maintaining his ill humour. By the time the sweets had arrived she was winning special attentions and occasional smiles out of him. Millicent watched the scene with clear-eyed disgust, and the more she watched the more her father threatened to make a fool of himself.

Aunt Rachel talked mostly to Una. Everything seemed to be going swimmingly, and as the conversation floated past me I sat back in my chair and ate with a feeling of ease and well-being and a glow of world friendship, especially towards the present company. You had only to allow people to know each other, I thought, and all would be well. There would be no more wars and quarrels.

The conversation turned on matters of general interest, as between strangers, and only at one point, during our

coffee after lunch, did something real pop its head out for a moment. Aunt Rachel said to Una:

'How do you think Jack is looking?'

I was brought to myself with a shock. The picture of world peace vanished, and tingles of apprehension coursed through me.

'Oh, very fit,' Una said.

'When did you last see him?'

'Just before we left Beckenham.'

I looked at them sharply. Something in the tones of the voices brought it home to me with certainty that they had met before. And I had introduced Una pompously on the front doorstep.

I hardly spoke another word until we were outside the house. As soon as the garden gate was closed, ignoring Trixie on my arm, I said to Una:

'So you 've met Aunt Rachel before?'

'Yes. What made you think so?'

I was silent for a moment.

'Why in the name of all that 's decent did you allow me to go through the humiliation of introducing you?'

'But, Phil, I didn't know you were going to. . . .'

My fury rose. 'Didn't know? What did you think I was going to do? Didn't know!'

'No.'

'When we agreed on this expedition why didn't you say that you 'd been here before?'

'I haven't.'

'Oh, well,' I said, 'you know what I mean. When did you meet Aunt Rachel?'

'Jack brought her along once.'

'Jack, Jack, blast Jack. What the hell do you think you are doing, Una?'

'And what do you think you 're doing, Phil, blackguarding me up and down the street? You leave me alone for years.'

What do you expect me to do? Shut myself up until it pleases your gracious self to give me an airing? Do you suppose you know one hundredth, one thousandth part of what I've been doing these years? If you do you'd better think again.'

'Had you met Uncle Henry?'

'No, I hadn't—if that's any consolation.'

'I am a damned fool,' I said.

Una did not dispute this self-evident truth. Instead she put her hand in my arm.

'If you are, Phil, I wish you'd be more of one—for me.'

CHAPTER XIII

His Sister-in-Law

BEATRICE HOPKINS, my sister-in-law and my father's something-or-other, was then living in Potters Bar. When London became too hot during the blitz a friend offered her refuge there. This friend's name was Mrs. Welby, and she lived alone in a very enlightened way in a house called Avalon, where I went to visit Beatrice at the end of October, a detached house, small and very cold, shivering with its thin walls, in a large and barren piece of garden unnaturally exposed to the east winds. Inside, the house was so clean that you could have eaten off the floor anywhere. Brass and copper articles gleamed in the light reflected from polished floors and tables, and jostled uneasily with modern furniture, hanging mats, and nondescript rugs, smelling of newness, laid neatly about the rooms and passages.

Mrs. Welby, with whom I had a tête-à-tête for a few

minutes while we were waiting for Beatrice to come down, was burning with curiosity and full of feminine tact. We introduced ourselves on the doorstep, and when I had hung up my hat and coat she sat me down in her drawing-room, and offered me coffee, for which the equipment was already set out on a little table.

'Beatrice won't be a minute,' she said, 'and then I shall leave you together here. You can have this room and be quite undisturbed. No doubt you will have business matters to discuss.'

This made me feel like a suitor being encouraged by his prospective mother-in-law. Such encouragement, I thought, would destroy anything but the most tenacious romance. I gazed dispassionately at the sofa with its two neat cushions, one either end. However, Mrs. Welby was not in any such relation to me, and seeing in one corner of the room a new baby-grand piano, I said:

'Are you fond of music, Mrs. Welby?'

'Oh, yes. Passionately.'

'And do you play yourself?'

'Yes.'

We looked at each other, about to show off our knowledge of the art, and to judge and assess the other on his or her conversational performance, like chance strangers weighing up each other's social status, by preliminary manoeuvring for accent and manner.

'You must give me the pleasure of hearing you while I am here.'

She demurred. 'Of course I only play for my own amusement now. I'm not a concert performer.'

'Quite,' I said.

'Are you a pianist, Mr. Empresson?'

'No, I play no instrument. I wish I did. But I'm a tireless listener. Play something while we're waiting,' I urged.

'Oh, no, I couldn't, thank you.'

'Do, please,' I egged her on.

A few minutes later she was mangling a nocturne by Chopin. It was eleven o'clock in the morning.

'Thank you so much,' I said when she had finished. 'Do go on.' Do stop, I meant.

She jumped at the chance of an encore to massacre a *Cathédrale engloutie*.

'Thank you so much,' I murmured, as the muffled muddle died away; 'are you fond of the moderns?'

'Debussy,' she said, 'yes, I love him. . . .' Godlike, I thought, she destroyed those whom she loved. . . . 'But the truly modern, no. Sheer cacophony. I must say I can't make head or tail of them.'

'Bartok, you mean, or Stravinsky?'

'Yes, exactly.'

Put a sock in it, I thought, and said: 'Do you get much music here, except for the wireless, I mean?'

'Quite a lot. Yes, we get some good people down. Myra Hess was here in the summer. I went, of course. And then last week we had Hebe Childs. Have you heard her?'

'Oh, yes, often. . . . As a matter of fact I know her a little.' I could not resist the reflected glory. 'Though she wouldn't know me,' I added to keep my conscience quiet.

'Oh, do you?' she said. 'How very interesting!'

Just then Beatrice came into the room. I would not have known her. I would have passed her by in the street. What she thought of my changed appearance I could not guess, because she greeted me easily as 'Phil,' just as though we were old, old friends, and we both paused to get our breath.

During the pause Mrs. Welby said: 'Isn't it interesting? Mr. Emprisson knows Hebe Childs. You remember how much we enjoyed her playing last week.'

This apparently harmless remark was reeking with cattiness.

'Oh, yes. How interesting,' Beatrice said, without any sign of interest.

'How was she looking?' I asked out of devilment.

'Why, now that you mention it, I thought she was looking rather pale,' Mrs. Welby said. 'Probably it's a great strain for a child of that age. Has she been ill?'

Beatrice, at these irrelevancies, seemed to be annoyed with Mrs. Welby rather than with me. She looked impatiently at her friend from behind her glasses, and said:

'Have you shown Phil the way about the house?'

'It's all right, thank you,' I said.

Mrs. Welby took the hint. 'Well, I expect you two young people will want to be left alone. You must have a lot to discuss.' I was delighted to see her well-groomed unalterable figure leave the room.

Beatrice's hair was very grey, and she wore it in an Eton crop that was long out of date. Her hands were smaller than Una's, and her general appearance was more fragile. When she took her glasses off her eyes were misty and young-looking.

Notwithstanding our relief at getting rid of Mrs. Welby it was not easy to begin when we were alone, because I knew that Beatrice must condemn me in her heart for my treatment of Una. When the silence became embarrassing I took the bull by the horns.

'I have a message for you,' I said. 'The way I said 'you' sounded almost insulting.'

Beatrice caught her breath. 'Oh? From whom?'

'From my father.'

I turned my glance full on her, as if I could flood-light her façade. I watched her every tiny movement. Her eyes lost their focus and she seemed to be staring downward into nothingness. She wrung her small hands

pathetically. She was vulnerable, but for what reason I could not tell. Did she love my father? I would not believe it.

'Go on,' she whispered.

I doubled the intensity of my gaze.

"'Tell her that he's the image of Sammy Blundel.'"

For a few moments Beatrice did not move at all. Then she turned towards me, and her face broke into an expression that was painful to witness. She was not wearing her glasses, and the pain in her eyes seemed to have nothing to do with the movements of her mouth.

'There's some mistake,' she moaned.

'No,' I lied.

'It's nothing to do with me,' she shouted. 'What do you mean by concocting a message like that?'

I was dumbfounded by the violence of her reaction.

'What do you mean by it?' she screamed. It was utterly unlike her to scream, I felt sure. 'Why do you come and torture me like this?'

Poor Beatrice. She flushed and broke into a storm of weeping. For my father? I do not think so.

Now for the purposes of this story I do not judge. I look, but I do not judge. I do not even pretend to know or to understand. If my character is wanted, that lowest common denominator which passes in society for a character, let the others speak.

Beatrice had her idea of me, no doubt. Although we were strangers by any ordinary standard, she had known me as a child, before my various disguises were as elaborate as they are now. Thus she could not turn to me for help in her personal emergency, and she must have found it very difficult to forgive my cruelty.

'Why should he send me a message like that? Why? It isn't fair. . . .' Her manner was calmer.

'My dear Beatrice, I am not responsible for the content of other people's messages, especially when they are dead. I am only the messenger.'

She looked at me suspiciously. 'Tell me exactly what happened.'

I told her.

'And nothing more?'

'Nothing.'

'Of course it concerns your mother.' It was my turn to squirm. 'And what do you think of yourself, Phil,' she went on, 'what do you think of yourself, coming here and lying to me?'

Her righteous indignation did not touch my heart. I evaded the question by saying: 'I didn't come here to lie to you, Beatrice.'

'What in heaven's name did you come for?' She was still quivering from my clumsy and ignorant blows.

'I came here to ask your advice about my father's affairs. There is a claim against his estate by the Smallwoods. You ought to know what his real intentions were, if any one does.'

She forgot her trouble for the moment. 'He meant his money to go to you, Phil. I know that. He told me so often.'

'The devil he did,' I said, hating my father for the breach of confidence. 'Did you know the Smallwood crowd?'

'Yes, I met them once or twice.'

'Had she any influence with him?'

'Camilla Smallwood? My dear Phil! Have you seen her?'

'No, I've only spoken to her on the telephone.'

'You underrate your father's taste.'

'Not at all, Beatrice,' I said, looking at her significantly. The whole scene was becoming more and more repugnant to us both. How could my father have let himself in for this?

Beatrice offered me whisky from a new half-bottle obviously bought specially for the occasion. The alcohol gave me courage to ask her how she was situated herself. She brushed me aside proudly.

'Oh, we each have a settlement, Una and I—you know, of course—from my father.' At this point her eyes looked happy. 'Just enough for me to live on.' It was fifty pounds a year, I knew. 'I always told your father that I could look after myself.'

The dirty dog, I thought. Criminal meanness. 'I should have thought that my father might have . . .'

Beatrice said icily: 'He's been an angel to me.'

I took the hint and said no more. As a result of my silence she volunteered some remarks about my dad, about 'Herbert,' as she called him. Her attitude sickened me beyond measure, and when at one point she said something critical of my mother I rose in wrath.

'Leave mother out of it,' I said sharply.

It was an abrupt end to our attempted research into the lost time, and we sat like a couple of angry children for a minute or two, until our scene was ended by a discreet knock on the door. Nothing could have enraged me more than that tactful knock. 'Can I come in?' Mrs. Welby's voice asked smoothly. I wondered how long she had been listening outside the door.

'Yes, of course,' Beatrice said.

'I must not interrupt. . . .' Mrs. Welby, dark, compact, and carefully made up, looked from one to the other of us, interrupting with all her power. 'Now I wonder what you two have been discussing so busily.'

'I will give you three guesses, Mrs. Welby,' I said offensively.

She winced under the unexpected insult, but kept her head.

'Beatrice dear,' she said sweetly, 'of course your brother-in-law will be lunching with us, will he not?'

'You'll stay, Phil?' Beatrice asked. 'We've been expecting you.'

'Yes, thank you very much.' The half-bottle of whisky pressed the invitation home. I will leave them a little, I thought, in the spirit of Hitler approaching a foreign power.

I had completely underestimated my opposition. Not only was I not offered whisky, but my two hostesses clamped me down so rapidly and so effectively that I dared not even ask for it. I found myself in the position of a guest with no family rights or claims, and since I had not taken the trouble to use common politeness to my principal hostess, Mrs. Welby, I was soon made to realize that she would exercise only common politeness to me. I did everything I could to please them, and resorted to making conversation. Mrs. Welby did not forgive me, however.

After lunch I tried to arrange another interview alone with Beatrice. But Mrs. Welby was not going to allow this in her house, and by 2.30 I was on their asphalted path and the Yale lock had clicked behind me. When I turned at the privet hedge to wave good-bye I saw nothing but empty windows, neatly curtained, and my half-raised hand fell as flat as my conversation at lunch time.

All the same I felt sure that they must be watching me, both of them. How could it be otherwise, I argued arrogantly, in a small house like that where they never had a man visitor? I subsequently learned that Mrs. Welby had a friend who was a regular caller. Indeed, not long after, Mrs. Welby married this Mr. Spayne, who went to live in that very house. On her money. And Beatrice . . . But that is another story.

CHAPTER XIV

Scene at the Rectory

EVEN the longest, hottest day can bathe out the future in its sun for only a few hours; and in October or early November the mellow sunshine carries within it the night, and the winter that is to come.

When I left Potters Bar in the early afternoon the clouds were already beginning to assemble, and I knew that in an hour or two they would be gathering for the evening. The sun would soon be gone. Above and behind the clouds would come the bombers. We would hear their drone, and the whistle and explosions of their excrement. I tried to imagine the men in them, black specks at that height, fearful for their own lives, and naturally concerned with their family affairs. I tried to imagine them pushing off the large bombs, each likely to fall on someone waiting below, to read the expression on their faces and to look into their hearts. There was no room for Hans or Emil in the picture, and the only solution was to think of Hitler himself, moustache and all, flying over, a winged monster.

'He's over again,' people said; 'he dropped two on so-and-so.' Others beside me evidently felt the need of a personal devil.

'How can it end?' I thought, shivering on Potters Bar station, as any one might do, even on the hottest day, 'how can it end?' With relief I caught a British train, driven by a British engine-driver, and experienced that sense of security one has on returning to these islands from the unreliable Continent. So does a man who emerges from a night club or illegal saloon, where he has been for a few hours at the mercy of people who, for professional reasons, are not swayed by justice or righteousness, only

human-kindness surviving, feel relief on re-entering normal society, where he can call the police.

How would our security, our British citizenship, our 'after you,' stand up to the test of hunger or starvation?

In my anxiety to grapple with the Smallwoods, I travelled straight through to Godmansterne, and wired Una that business would detain me for a day or two. Little did I guess for how many days. I slept at the station hotel, rose at noon next day, and breakfasted on a cut off the joint, two vegetables, and a pint of bitter. My feet, when they left the hotel, drifted me automatically towards The Laurels; with an effort of will I jerked them in the direction of the rectory, which I knew from the outside, but had never entered.

The rectory is a modern, prosperous-looking house, secular one would say, lying back from and below the level of the road. On that grey, autumnal day, I opened its big double gates and traversed its well-kept gravel. I was admitted to a furnished hall, where I noticed a clock at 2.27, and a barometer at 'Change.' The maid showed me where to hang my hat and coat, and led me to a large drawing-room at the back of the house, which looked out on a lawn sloping down towards a flower garden. A bright fire was burning, and the room was furnished with sofas and settees and arm-chairs of graded degrees of comfort and impressiveness. This room was evidently the scene of the parochial gatherings; it might have been designed to keep people in their places.

I had previously announced my impending arrival by telephone, and after giving me a few minutes to cool my heels the Rev. Cyril Smallwood came in. He held out a pink, much-wrung object, and we shook hands.

I saw at once by the unnaturally bright look in his eye that he would normally have been asleep. I had committed the major error of shattering his after-lunch nap. It boded ill.

'Do you smoke?' he beamed.

'Yes,' I said, 'I do.'

'Allow me to offer you a cigarette.'

He handed me a silver box such as is often to be seen in a non-smoking household. The cigarettes inside were stale, and of an obscure brand. He also supplied a match-box and an ash-tray.

'Won't you have one?' I queried. It was obvious enough that he did not smoke.

'No, thank you; no indeed. Tobacco is not one of my indulgences, ha ha!'

I could not see anything funny in this, and did not laugh. Moreover I was fascinated by his liveliness of manner, through which he was disguising his agonizing longing for sleep.

'My sister will be down in a few minutes,' he volunteered. 'She usually has a little nap in the afternoon. Forty winks, you know.' He winked himself.

'Oh, yes, I know. I hope I haven't come at an inconvenient time.'

'Not at all, not at all, Mr. Emprisson. Ahem! We do so miss your dear father. He was a frequent visitor here. Dear me,' he pulled out his watch, 'a quarter to three.'

I did not pursue this hare, and after some desultory conversation the rector, finding me even more trying than he had feared, went to the door and called: 'Camilla!' There was no answer. 'Camilla!' Still no reply. Then, as a shot into the blue, 'Camilla, Mr. Emprisson is here.'

He shut the door again, and we resumed our talk. The rector snatched at any straw to keep us away from the business of my visit. 'Quot homines tot sententiae,' I remember he said at one point, and later 'non omnia possumus omnes.' I heard the clock in the hall strike three, and imagined the barometer shifting back to 'Stormy.' It must have been

about a quarter past three when Camilla Smallwood came in. We both rose to our feet. She offered me her hand. 'How do you do, Mr. Empresson?' she said; 'it seems funny to call you Mr. Empresson when we used to call your father Herbert.' She was small and wore her prematurely white hair short.

Call me Phil, I thought, and I'll tell you where you stand.

Unlike her brother, she came straight to the point. 'Now let us get to business,' she said. 'I'm sure that Mr. Empresson's time is valuable.'

'My time is at your service,' I said, 'and apparently my money.'

This did not raise a smile, but I noticed an exchange of glances between brother and sister. She was egging him on to speak, and, with an effort, going red as he did so, he said:

'In considering the matter we have to bear in mind the—er—wishes of the deceased. What you or we may think about the rights and wrongs has little or nothing to do with it, Mr. Empresson.'

'Speak plainer,' I said.

'I mean—er—that your views, or mine for that matter, as to who is the rightful heir, have no bearing.'

'The rightful heir! What are your views, Mr. Smallwood?'

He did not answer.

'Am I the rightful heir, or am I not?'

Still he did not answer.

'Let us suppose that I am the rightful heir,' I said provocatively. 'Let us suppose that I, the only son, am the heir. Under what influence was my father's fortune diverted from me to this alleged charity?'

The fat was in the fire. Miss Smallwood bristled with anger, and could no longer keep silence.

'You must control yourself, Mr. Empresson,' she said acidly.

'I will not.'

'Cyril, if Mr. Empresson chooses to insult me, I shall have to ask him to leave my house.'

Cyril rose to his feet. 'Friends, friends,' he said. 'Dear me, indeed this will not do. Surely we can talk this over like rational people and come to some arrangement.'

'There's only one "arrangement" that will suit me,' I said, 'and that is for my money to be returned to me. Alternatively, you can keep the lot and fry in hell with it.'

Miss Smallwood flushed deeply. She was under too much pressure to speak, but she made frantic little movements with her hands as if appealing to her brother to strike me. He, however, fortunately for me, had gone white and flabby, white against his black cloth. Taking advantage of the enemy's disorder, I stepped recklessly outside my province, and went on, staring fiercely at Miss Smallwood:

'And what is this distressed gentlewomen's society on whose behalf you have filched five thousand pounds? Are you one of the gentlewomen, may I ask? Are you distressed? If not, I'll endeavour to make you so for a few moments.'

'Stop,' she screamed, but I would not be stopped and walked threateningly towards her.

'Moreover, how did you wheedle this money out of my father? What beastly little method did you use? Oh, yes, I know my father—I know about him and I shall know more soon. How did you twist him? Answer me that.'

In another moment I would have realized that all this was irrelevant, but the professional attitude of the Smallwoods infuriated me, and I flung myself into still coarser personal insults. I did more than that. I stretched the truth to the point of saying:

'It is not myself alone I have to think of. There are my wife and my small daughter, bombed out of Beckenham.' This appeal *ad misericordiam* made even me feel sick. 'For myself,' I went on, 'you can have this money on condition that I never have any communication with you again—by thought, word, or deed.'

'Cyril,' she said, 'the man is mad.'

'My dear sir,' Cyril intervened.

'My dear sir,' I said, 'I am not a business letter. Kindly keep your endearments for your friends. Who is the secretary of this society? Who is the auditor, and am I to see the accounts? How am I to know that it is anything better than a common swindle?'

At this point Miss Smallwood put her hands to her ears and left the room. Her brother was about to follow her, but I intercepted him.

'Answer my questions,' I said.

'It is a matter for my solicitors,' he replied. I could see his conscience prompting him to deal with me on man-to-man lines, but his sister called him. 'Cyril,' she called, and, he went off without looking at me, passing me by, as it were, on the other side. Separated from him by only a few feet of air, I could yet feel the whole hierarchy and cunning, the dignity and justice of the English law between us.

Thus I was left alone in the Smallwoods' drawing-room, like a welcome and trusted guest. I had ousted them from their own house, under the guise of a friendly caller, and found myself in the position of Hitler when occupying a country that he has taken under his protection. I looked round the well-furnished room, then walked about, examining pictures and vases and silver objects that caught my attention. I slipped a selection of the silver into an imaginary bag, on the grounds that I might as well have something to show for my five thousand pounds. The door was

not quite shut, and I looked out into the hall. There was no one there, but the front door had been left ajar, ostentatiously, as it might be to let the cat out; or as in a house of ill fame.

I wondered what the Smallwoods were doing. I could hear the sound of voices from another part of the house, and guessed that I was under observation. Well, they had lost the use of their rectory until I chose to leave, because they could neither of them approach me without bridging the legal cleft.

The clock on the drawing-room mantelpiece struck an elegant four. I decided to leave. I crossed the hall quietly towards the open front door. On my way I noticed, standing on a polished oak chest, a recent photograph of my father in a silver frame. You dark horse, I thought, I am not going to leave you in this *galère*. I collected my hat and coat, as any guest might do, then without hesitation I picked up the photograph and slipped it into my pocket, traversed the hall, and slammed the Smallwoods' front door behind me.

CHAPTER XV

The Laurels

ON that grey November day the evening was already drawing in. My original intention had been to take the last train for Nottingham, and be home by midnight, but the feeling of the oncoming darkness, a smell of fog in the air, and the thought of the journey across London in the black-out made me change my mind.

Outside the rectory, instead of turning to the left in the direction of Godmansterne station, I turned to the right. The broad asphalt path, on one side of the tarred road,

served a number of detached houses, all standing well back, decorously spaced. In peacetime great varieties and quantities of fish and meat and vegetables would pour into each of these houses for their evening dinners; and bacon and eggs, and kidneys and tomatoes and sausages for their breakfasts; and for tea, new bread and scones and sweet cakes. Even in wartime legs of lamb were being handled by cooks in some of those kitchens. Along the road the style of houses grew larger and more expensive-looking. I visualized larger and more succulent legs of lamb, and even better-warmed vegetable dishes, sherries and cocktails held between the finger and thumb, and red wine decanted, and whisky and soda standing amid shining tumblers on sideboards. Behind the windows of a particularly prosperous-looking mansion a uniformed parlour-maid drew the curtains and adjusted the black-outs.

On the other side of the road were tall trees, bare of leaves. They gave no sign of the abundance that was being enjoyed opposite them; on the contrary, they looked wet and desolate, preparing themselves for their long hibernation. Not even a bird would find enough food on them; still less a successful city man.

I crossed the road and turned to the left. The side road led me uphill, and I realized that I was heading in the direction of my father's house, The Laurels.

I wondered I had not thought of it before. I would ask Mrs. Evetts to put me up for the night. It was the obvious thing to do. I could return to Nottingham the next day.

Under the relief of having abandoned the dangerous and dismal journey, I quickened my footsteps. I saw a cup of tea in prospect, and later a comfortable supper. There might even be something to drink. My father did not use alcohol himself, but he was a good host, and he always kept supplies in the house. My anticipatory pleasure was increased, if anything, by the wail of an early alert; I felt

reinforced in the wisdom of my decision not to travel. I walked buoyantly, hurrying. There was nearly a mile ahead of me, and the neighbourhood was deserted.

My way led me along the edge of the common. The fine leafless branches of the birch-trees made a delicate tracery against the lowering cloudbank, like an etching on grey paper. Soon the full moon would rise behind that bank, either to help or hinder the German bombers. Meanwhile it was still daylight, and in spite of the alert I enjoyed a sense of security as I hurried over the soaking grass, feeling that I was not a good target. I heard a faint wail in my ears, like a baby's cry, thin but penetrating. Murderers, I thought, shaking my fist. The thin cry persisted.

I left the common and took to the tidy suburban road that would bring me in a few minutes to my father's house. As I approached The Laurels I saw no sign of anything unusual. This was because the house is concealed by the heavy trees and evergreens that surround it. But as soon as I was inside the gate, I looked at the ground-floor windows, and there, instead of the usual shining glass, I saw wooden boards. I hurried to the front door. It was boarded up. I went round to the back of the house. There the damage was more severe. There was broken glass all over the ground, and the empty windows were staring, making the place look wounded. In the failing light I could see that the roof was still on, and the walls were standing firm. Coal and coke were piled high in the lean-to; no one had touched it, evidently, at a time of shortage.

Getting no reply to my knocks and rings, I went next door. Yes, there had been a heavy bomb near by, three nights past; windows blown out in many houses, but little other damage luckily. Yes, Mrs. Evetts had left; her nerve was shaken, and she had gone to stay with her sister, leaving the house and furniture to look after itself. Poor old lady. Could they help me in any way? A meal or a bed?

No, thank you. It was very kind of them. I would inspect the damage for myself and then get in touch with Mrs. Evetts. Had they her address? They had. Thank you very much.

I returned to The Laurels, walked up the steps at the back, thence traversed to a window-sill and clambered in through a broken window. The hole, surrounded by jagged edges and spears of glass, looked larger than it was, and I had to be careful not to cut my hands and ears. As soon as I was inside I realized that the structure was undamaged except for broken windows and wrenched doors. The furniture stood as usual, and so did the ornaments, the pictures, and the glass. I heard the rhythmic suctional tick of the electric clock in the hall.

I went down to the kitchen and made myself a cup of tea. I found stale bread, margarine, and a half-eaten cake in the larder.

At about this time a wind sprang up. It increased rapidly in force, and the grey pall gave way to driving clouds. Heavy rain began to fall. The moon, now risen, was strong enough to alleviate total blackness. Above the whistling of the wind I heard the 'all clear' signal; it was the sort of night to deter even the modern super-airman. I drew the heavy curtains in the sitting-room—they made a good enough black-out for me to be able to use candle light—and by six o'clock I had a fire leaping and flickering. A tall shadow, a human figure reaching the ceiling, bent over me, and I was on the point of speaking before dismissing it as my own. I took my candle and went to my father's study. There the windows had been boarded up, and I did not have to concern myself about the light. I shut the door and turned on the electric switch. It operated a green-shaded reading lamp in the middle of my father's desk, and the light fell on his polished wooden deed-box.

The smell of stale smoke was gone, there remained only

mustiness and dampness. I looked in the drawer of the desk, and found the key of the box.

I turned back the lid. Within were bundles of papers, tied up in red tape, referring to the affairs of various relations and friends for whom my father had acted. The papers seemed to be in good order. Among them I found a packet of new notes; twenty crackling five-pound notes with a rubber band round them. I put them in my pocket saying 'Thank you, dad,' feeling like a boy who has had an exceptionally large tip. This lot, I determined, was not going to the Smallwoods, whatever happened.

I was about to close the box, when I noticed lying on the bottom a small photograph frame, face downwards. I picked it up and glanced at it with amused tolerance. There, sure enough, on the faded brown print, stood my father, tall and thin. He was wearing morning dress with a high stand-up collar. His black hair, parted low on one side, fell over his forehead on the other side. His arm rested on the chair on which my mother was sitting. She looked wonderfully young and sweet in expression. Her face in the photograph was rounder than I remembered. Her hair rose high on her head, and the high neck of her dress seemed to be the counterpart, in feminine style, of my father's collar. In front of my mother, and prominent in the group, stood my sister Cicely, a tiny tot with her hair in a big bow and wearing a pinafore. Her face, on which there was a wide yet shy grin, hardly came above my mother's knees. All this I took in at a first glance, and then began to look for my little self.

My mother had two babies on her lap, one sitting on her knee and the other standing up and leaning against her shoulder. I did not know which was me. I looked more closely. The two infants were remarkably alike, and in either I could see something of myself. Then a chord of buried memory, something utterly forgotten, struck in my

head, like the clock my father used to describe; the reverberation swept through me. I buried my head in my hands and burst into a flood of passionate tears.

CHAPTER XVI

The Laurels (continued)

WHEN I lifted my head I was no longer alone. I had recovered my twin, my twin brother or sister. We must have been between one and two when he died—my brother, I thought. Till now I had tried to keep him alive in my own person, had tried to be the person he would have been.

Sammy Blundel. Yes, that was he. Sammy Blundel Empresson, my brother. Named after my mother's friend, of whom, according to my father, he, and therefore I, was the image. That must have been my father's idea of a joke. What audacity, I thought, what vulgarity, I added, at such a moment. What insensibility.

Sammy Blundel Empresson, deceased, aged one year. There must have been a family conspiracy to veil this event, for my parents had never given me an inkling of what actually happened. They had left me in the dark. Why? Not in my interests. I would rather have known the truth. It must have been on my mother's behalf, for fear that allusion to her child's death would throw her mind off the rails. And remembering my mother's expression when she thought that no one was looking at her, the set line of her mouth and her ashen pallor, I could well believe that she must have been near breaking point for many years. It was my father's idea, obviously. What unselfishness, I thought, what delicacy, I added. What sensibility!

I turned out the light and left my father's study. The

wind was moaning outside, and pouring through the broken windows at the back, flapping the curtains. But that night, that night of the discovery of my twin, I did not feel alone. A real soul had lifted the responsibility that I had shouldered for so many years. A real mind had shared for a moment the mental tight-rope to which I was heir.

Fortified by my discovery of Sammy Blundel I thought that we, or rather I, would go round the house and look over things personally. I had not been there since the funeral, and it struck me that it was my duty to take some care of my father's things. I went to the drawing-room, piled coal on the fire against my return, and began my tour.

I found that I had no means of communication with my twin except by words such as 'ga,' 'gaga,' 'ba,' 'baba,' 'da,' and so on, but this did not constitute any difficulty in our relationship. We were in touch on some other dimension, independent of the calendar, in a way that was perfectly real and satisfactory, in the only way, in fact, in which two human beings can be in touch. 'Short,' I said aloud, 'as our acquaintance was, it was certainly close while it lasted.' We laughed.

At the top of the stairs, I opened the first door on the right. This was the housekeeper's bedroom. I put my head in, and flashed my torch on her things as she had left them; her hair-net, her high-heeled shoes, her night-gown case. I smelt her smell, permeating the room. Her small window, left closed, was not broken.

The next room on the right was mine, or rather the one in which I slept when I was there. I glanced at the books and photographs, rummaged in the chest of drawers, and found a few oddments, a pipe, a knife, and some old handkerchiefs, which I put in my pocket. I remarked the absence of personality in the room. It was like a hotel bedroom, and to my nose there was no smell. So tolerant are we of our own emanations.

A door banged loudly and startled me. I went out to the landing. The door of my father's bedroom was swinging in the wind. All his windows were out, and when I went in the wind and the rain seemed to be whistling round the room.

I shut the door behind me, paused for a moment to feel my way in the darkness. There was no question of switching on a light with the windows out and the curtain flapping to the ceiling. In this room there was a strong sense of personality, and I had no difficulty in reconstructing various scenes, including the last I had witnessed there, when my father lay unconscious, passing away. I had been alone at his bedside, except for the doctor, and just before the end had heard him say: 'Tell her that he's the image of Sammy Blundel.'

His four-poster bed stood against the right-hand wall, between me and the window. I could discern a glimmer of whiteness in the quilt, and in the glimmer I could imagine the luminosity of a human form, swathed like a chrysalis. I groped my way to where I knew there was a high-backed arm-chair and sat in it. The wings of the chair protected me from the draught that was pouring in through the broken panes. As I sat the rain clouds broke, and the full moon behind them shone low in the sky. Its light poured into the room through the empty window-frames. I saw the bed clearly, its counterpane neatly spread and innocent of creases. On the left wall the mirror, in which the handsome features of my father had so often been reflected, for he was proud of his personal appearance and particular about his dress, hung above the dressing-table as usual, and the hair brushes and comb and brilliantine lay waiting for their head. The wardrobe stood against the wall opposite the windows; I crossed the thick carpet and opened its long door. My father's suits still hung there, neatly arranged, including the morning dress and striped trousers in which he had

looked particularly impressive. For that respectability, I thought, for that social status, and the public recognition that went with it, he had made his efforts, and I hoped that he had found the reward adequate.

'Nonsense, boy.' The reaction from my smug thought was so sharp that I heard the tone of my father's voice. 'Nonsense, boy. There's no question of rewards or status. I enjoyed my life. Enjoyed it—don't you understand?'

How he could have enjoyed such a turn-out passed my comprehension. What about Beatrice and now the Smallwood woman? How could he have enjoyed the years and years after the loss of my mother?

'I can't see eye to eye, dad.'

'You understand nothing, Phil. My life went like a flash, and you know nothing about me and nothing about your mother.'

'Mother,' I stammered.

'Your mother, Phil. But not mine. You've got it wrong from A to Z.'

Racing clouds veiled the moon, then blotted it out, and I sat alone in the darkness. What did I know of my family? I knew that my mother was of New England stock on her father's side, one of five in an old Virginian family; they had crowded round me when I was small, grandfather making the centre of the picture, with his short beard and long cigar. On her mother's side she was English, and she alone among the family had been sent to England to be educated. She was brought up strictly by an aunt in Hampshire. Just before she was due to return to the States, a finished product, she was taken to a dance in London, where she met my father. She was seventeen years old then, and married him when she was eighteen.

My father, born and brought up in London, in much poorer circumstances, had not made a position for himself by that time. He was thirty, and had the easy manners and

good conversation of a man without personal ambition. He had let his chances go and found himself, with some sense of grievance, passed over by more straightforward men. He did not miss the main chance, however, and his capture of my mother laid the foundation of his fortune.

As soon as they were married they went to the States, and my mother's family found a job for my father in the New York office of their Philadelphia business. Outwardly this move was a success, but once again my father had a sense of grievance, as if he had been cut out for better things. It must have been difficult for him to be under such obligation to his pilgrim father-in-law, and I suspect that my grandfather, with his beard and cigar, and his kind eyes and pink cheeks, had the power to turn the screw. The price my father paid was the loss of his independence and the sacrifice of his artistic longings; for as a young man he had been a professional cellist, and he threw this talent to the winds in order to become a successful business man.

Not that success came to him at once. He was only a junior clerk when my sister Cicely was born, soon after our arrival in New York. I say 'our' in a proprietary way, for I did not appear on the scene till two years later, together with, as I had just discovered, my twin brother, Sammy Blundel. From then until my mother's death, when I was ten years old, I have the brightly coloured recollection of childhood, the fleeting glimpses, the laughter, the sudden unexpected tears. Not until after then did success come my father's way, leading ultimately to the establishment of his own branch of the business in London, and the recovery of his independence as Herbert Empresson, the man of wealth and position, and of eminently respectable appearance, but of such odd subterfuges, calculated to make us look different in public from what we were in private, or so I thought as I sat in his high-backed chair, my face turned in the darkness towards the bed on which he died.

CHAPTER XVII

The Warden

My meditations were interrupted by a loud knock at the front door. I groped my way down and opened it. An air-raid warden complained of a light, the firelight presumably, showing through the curtains of the drawing-room.

I asked him in and he commiserated politely on the damage done to the house.

'Dirty business, eh?'

'Yes,' I replied, and was explaining that the housekeeper was away, when he said:

'Aren't you Empresson?'

I nodded and looked at him more closely. I thought that I recognized him under his tin hat.

'My name's Lloyd,' he went on. 'Tubby Lloyd. I've seen you around with your dad.'

'Oh, yes, Tubby, of course. How are you?' We shook hands. 'I wish I could offer you a drink.'

'That's all right, old man. Have a drop of this.' He pulled out his pocket flask.

'Oh, I won't rob you.'

'Go ahead. Go on, old man.'

I drank a good mouthful and returned the flask.

'We miss the old man. A fine chap, old Bertie, if ever there was one.' Bertie, I thought, my father! 'Yes, he was one of the best,' Tubby continued, 'one of the very best. You wouldn't meet many like him in a long day's march.'

'We shall not see his like again,' I echoed.

'Quite.' Tubby sat down, removed his tin hat, and wiped the bald top of his head with a fine handkerchief. He was pink-cheeked and young-looking, and he carried a

paunch with the look of well-being and good temper that belongs to the naturally fat. The arm-chair received him appreciatively. 'What are you doing these days, Empresson? Haven't seen you since the funeral. Poor old Bertie.' There were tears of affection in Tubby's eyes.

'I'm in Nottingham for the time being.' I could not fail to be aware of his entire indifference as to where I lived, or with whom. 'How's Mrs. Lloyd?'

'Fine, thanks. She's in the A.R.P., too.' He hesitated, not sure whether I was married, and eventually said no more. I gave him no help.

We had no point of contact except through my father. On an impulse I took the silver-framed photograph of my dad out of my pocket, and held it out to him in the firelight. 'Seen this?'

He flashed his torch on it. 'It's the spit of him.' His eyes glistened with enthusiasm.

'Would you like it?'

'My dear fellow! Do you mean it?'

'Of course. Take it.'

'Well, thanks, old chap, thanks a thousand times. I shall treasure it, and so will my missis. We both loved the old boy, you know. It's a splendid likeness. I've seen it before somewhere; ah, yes, I remember; the rector has a copy in his hall.'

I took the bull by the horns. 'This is the rector's copy,' I said. 'I pinched it.'

Tubby laughed at what he supposed was my joke.

'I did,' I said. 'I pinched it from the old bastard. Off his table of knick-knacks.'

Tubby looked at me incredulously. 'My dear man, I can't possibly take it. I'm a warden.'

'Any one can see that,' I said.

'No, a churchwarden, I mean.'

'Put it in the silver collection,' I said.

Friend Tubby was obviously wounded. He was at a loss. 'You're a funny chap, Empresson,' he said at last. 'What have you got against the rector?'

'Nothing much.' Only five thousand pounds, I thought. 'I think his sister's a bitch.'

'She was devoted to old Bertie.'

'Old Bertie be damned,' I said. 'He seems to have inspired an extraordinary amount of affection in all and sundry. What was the game?'

I had Tubby floundering then. He was still holding the photograph, and his natural simplicity and loyalty came to his aid.

'He was one of the most unselfish men that ever lived, was old Bertie. We shall not see his like again.'

'I said that before.'

Tubby nearly lost his temper then, but with an effort made the necessary allowance. 'You're not yourself, old man. Take it easy, that's my advice.'

'I am myself,' I said, 'and moreover, old Bertie, as you call him, is, or rather was, my father. My father, do you understand, and his affairs are my affairs.'

Tubby threw me a look that gave me up as a bad job. I thought I had better ease off, as he had advised, and said:

'I wonder what the old boy would have thought of this mess.'

'He wouldn't have worried,' Tubby said gratefully, as if I had let him off the rack. 'Nothing rattled him.'

'You're telling me.'

'He was a wonderful influence, and we all respected him. Maybe you never saw that, Empresson. Ah well, he's gone now—and I must be going too.'

'But not so far,' I hoped politely. My storm was still muttering and grumbling.

Tubby sighed and wrenched himself out of the comfortable chair.

'Dossing down here?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Well, cheerio, old man. See after those curtains.'

'Cheerio,' I said, as we shook hands, 'and see after that photograph.'

So that I had the last word. Goodness knows why I treated him so rudely. I was not jealous.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Laurels (concluded)

HAVING fixed the curtains temporarily, I decided not to go upstairs to bed. The sheets might be damp for all I knew. Instead I pushed the two-ended settee in front of the fire, took off my shoes to save the floral cover, and stretched myself out as comfortably as I could. The settee was too short for me to lie flat. I put a cushion in the small of my back, and leant my head against the upholstered corner of the sofa. So have I seen the seriously ill propped up.

In that position my gaze fell on a corner of the room that was in shadow from the firelight.

If I stretched my neck back I could see the flicker on the ceiling, recalling the illnesses of childhood, when there is a fire in the bedroom. The flicker goes on and on through the wakeful night until it is intercepted by a head and shoulders, by mother, or father, bending over the cot. A cool hand on the head. How are you, dear? Mummy, dear mummy. The gay colours of childhood possessed me, the primary colours, the red toys, the yellow suns, and the blue waters. The grass was green again. Sammy must have seen those colours too. The years turned like the

coloured patterns in a kaleidoscope. I went on with mother, and Sammy was left behind. I took her hand and she led me safely. I climbed the hill of childhood, to the region of ideas. Others were with me. It was a happy expedition, but for glimpses of mother in distress, happy but for the subterfuges on our behalf, those things that were made to appear different in public from what they were in private. Happy, and above all safe. Mother was there.

But what was the chasm ahead of me? What was the dark gulf? The coloured scene seemed suddenly to blacken and a moaning wind rose. This was no place for a boy. Where was I to turn? Where was my safety now? There was a shout in my ears, and I held up my hands in horror.

From the cot it is the ceiling that holds the attention, the fire itself is visible only between the bars. But there were no bars to my cot now. The fire was within my reach, the danger and the heat of it, and I had only to stretch out my hand to burn. The fire enticed me. I could imagine myself rolling eagerly off my sofa to offer myself to the blaze. I would put my head on the coals, and my hair would crackle up the chimney.

Abstaining from the useless sacrifice, I turned my attention to the dark corner of the room, where the vertical stripes in the wallpaper pattern, usually so prominent, were no longer visible, and enjoyed the restfulness of the centre of the shadow and the flexibility of the shapes at its edges. I determined to look only for what I might see, and to put nothing there of my own accord.

I saw naked elm-trees, rising out of a fog. The beautiful shapes and convolutions of the trunks and arms and forms rose to cup and exhibit the arc of twigs, the flower heads, etched in brown against the grey. The complex pattern showed the symmetry and balance of natural growth.

I saw a village church, in late autumn. An angle of the

square Norman tower was towards me, dividing one face in brilliant moonlight from another in deep shadow. The moon blazed on the body of the church, and on the tombstones in the churchyard. In places the light was dappled through the yews, suggesting summer sunlight, and the stones stood at different angles, some jaunty, some respectable, some dead white, some grey, some green, producing together the effect of a living crowd, with underlying comradeship. I saw a newly covered grave and the headstone, the final tidiness. The stone was gleaming after new rain, and I read: 'In Ever Loving Memory from Herbert, Cicely and Phil.' I had sent no such message, I thought.

As the fire died down the flicker on walls and ceiling faded, until there remained only a red glow reflected from the painted and polished surfaces. I pulled a dressing-gown round me, an old garment of my father's, heavy and dirty, that I had found in his room. The noises of the house became more noticeable. The background of sound was the whistling and buffeting and moaning of the wind outside. It rose and fell in sweeping movements, like the strings of an orchestra, rushing up and down the scale from the low tones of the cellos to the singing of the violins; and whacked against the walls with the clatter of the double basses. Into this background the little sounds inside the house dropped, the fluty plop of a dripping tap, the reedy creak of a strained floor-board or piece of furniture. A door had been left open somewhere; its banging marked the climaxes like the clash of cymbals; and when the wind gathered force the curtains flapped inside the broken windows with a muffled roll of drums.

My body began to accept the rhythm of the night symphony, and my blood to course warmly to the bizarre melodies. I drowsed and then slept in the darkness and solitude. I remember an urgent droning, the unmistakable

throb of an enemy plane. Light flooded my darkness. I heard a crash. Then another and another.

'You filched her from me,' I shouted, 'my most precious possession. And you never even let me see her again. Only that terrible coffin.'

No doubt my resentment was familiar enough to my father. The box I had followed was in my eye again, and my father and sister weeping. Behind us was mother herself.

'Phil, give me a big kiss. Hold me, there's a dear.'

She was sitting in bed, very upright. Her hair fell over my hands and wrists. 'Where's Phil,' she cried, 'let me see him.' The life was draining from her. Then her eyes changed, and the cloud lifted. 'I hear the angels singing,' she said. When she fell back our arms were not ready for her. 'Oh, father,' I called in desolation.

CHAPTER XIX

Interior Lighting

WITH the final illumination I heard no crash. The floor shook and the walls and ceilings swayed. Then there was stillness, and by comparison dead silence. After an appreciable pause, I heard the clatter of debris and rubble on the roof of The Laurels, tumbling and gathering volume, like the applause at the end of a concert.

Tubby Lloyd came to my rescue, Tubby Lloyd the warden, that same to whom I had been unpardonably rude a few hours before, and took me to his own home. That was surely the action of a good Samaritan; done in my father's name, no doubt.

I must have presented a problem, because I could not

recollect my address in Nottingham, nor anything about my private affairs. 'Trixie is my daughter,' I said, not once, but repeatedly. I must have been grasping my one piece of certainty in a world of flux, the one fact for which the only evidence was my inner conviction. Trixie this, Trixie that, I said, harping on my daughter. Then after a day or two I pulled Una's name and address out of my bag of memory, and contact was established.

My first memory after that which was so blindingly illuminated in the flash of the bomb that hit The Laurels is of a voice. The intonation was agreeable and reassuring; so much so that I was glad not to be able to see Una's well-known outline. 'Una,' I said, 'I am thankful to have you with me,' and, still harping on my daughter, 'Where's Trixie?'

'Here I am, daddy,' squeaked a voice that I would not have recognized. It was much harder and tougher than I realized. I put out my hand and stroked the curls to make sure of her.

For me the room was black, or rather purple, punctuated by the streaks of an endless headache.

'Are the curtains drawn?' I asked.

It took them a moment to realize what had happened to me.

'Oh, daddy!' Trixie cried, and took my hand.

'Nothing to worry about,' I said, trying to make my dark glasses look friendly. I kept one hand over my eyes. No light filtered through to me. In my prone position I could listen to my visitors and fill in the familiar faces from memory.

I was astonished at the changed aspect of people whom I had hitherto judged visually, of Una in particular. She did not say much, but gradually, as the days and nights passed, all one to me, she began to disentangle the debris under which I was buried. One by one I felt my limbs and

organs freed from the weight and muddle of the past, until I began to see a glimpse of a future such as I had never dreamed of.

'Let's get out of here,' I said, as if we were in prison.

'Where do you want to go, Phil?'

Given this ample choice I saw the south of England spread before me under my interior lighting. Leith Hill and its pines, Firle Beacon plunging to the Sussex weald, Headley Common, Mickleham valley, Chiddingfold. Their beauty brought a lump to my throat. Would I ever see them again? I discarded these friends of a lifetime, treasured in memory, and with England at my feet named a place in Essex that I had never seen and Hitler had never heard of.

'Caxton,' I said.

'Caxton?'

'Yes. Caxton, Essex. Liverpool Street station.' I began to envisage the journey and to smell the London smoke.

Una played into my hands. Since I was not judged to be ill enough for a nursing home she arranged for the Lloyds to look after Trixie and me, while she went back to Nottingham to collect our things and dispose of our rooms. Then she was to look for our house in the country. I left it all to her. The only regret I had was that I should not see Mr. Smith again and his alcoholic shimmer.

'Give my regards to the Smiths,' I said to Una.

'I will,' she said. 'I'll say good-bye for you.'

And good-bye it was, for we heard afterwards that Mrs. Smith died suddenly of a long-standing complaint. Her husband managed to keep himself vertical for a week or two, but his heart was broken, and he followed her unobtrusively, without any serious attempt to stand on his own. So lost was he without his wife that he had no use even for his stand-by, his White Horse whisky, a case of which he caused to be sent on to me. We still have some of it, much to the

astonishment of our present neighbours. In fact that is the only reason why the people next door come to see us. They have no interest in us otherwise. He is a publisher, I understand, but does not know yet that I am writing this book. I shall drop it on him one day, after a couple of stiff White Horses. So that if these lines are ever published I shall have to thank the late Mr. Smith for it.

Una returned after a few days to report that she had rented a cottage in Caxton. Not many wives would have done it. I was moved, a walking case, with my black glasses and my stick, and Trixie hopping and jumping beside me. Good-bye, Lloyd. A thousand thanks. That's all right, old man. We're glad to do it. We'd do a lot for any of the Empressons. Father again, I thought. Good-bye, Mrs. Lloyd. How can we thank you?

We plunged through the roar and smell of London. Our train from Liverpool Street gathered speed. We were out.

We reached Caxton in rain and a searching north-east wind. There would be a hoar frost in the morning, I thought, if the rain were to let up. I had to fill in the scene for myself, as if I were indeed looking out of the casement windows of our cottage, the elm-trees soaring from the sodden meadows opposite, the shivering fields of winter greens alternating with sloping acres of new plough, the distant line of blue and grey hills and woods with scarcely a building to be seen, reception areas it was to be hoped for unlimited supplies of ill-directed bombs. I had to fill in for myself that English countryside which was to prove strong enough to resist the man-made world shapings.

As we stood inside our new house the rain beat against the window panes, and the wind rattled the doors and rustled the trees outside.

Under my new interior lighting I rediscovered a harder and tougher Trixie, a much more grown-up young person than I had thought. She disclosed an ambition to dance.

Eleven years old seemed to be early for such a notion, but she succeeded in impressing us, and for my part I could imagine the child's legs growing into the smooth kickers of the ballet girl and the child's face streamlining to the angularity of the dance. Already she seemed to walk splayed on springy heelless feet.

Trixie must have detected the seeds of my artistic sympathy with her, because while I began to see her as a famous ballerina, she apparently began to see me as a human being. So much so, that one day, to my surprise, I found myself telling her about my lost twin, Sammy Blundel, him of whom I had never spoken to a living soul before.

She was neither critical nor embarrassed. 'Oh, daddy, I wish I had a baby brother. *Couldn't* we?'

'We,' I said. 'It's hardly a matter for you and me, is it?'

'No, I suppose it isn't,' she said, 'but it would be lovely, wouldn't it?'

'It might or might not be.'

'But suppose he was the image of Sammy Blundel,' she said confidently.

That won me, and I went on to talk about her art, or rather to listen while she talked of Sædler's Wells and Karsovina and Ginger Rogers.

'Servants of Terpsichore,' I interposed once, in an attempt to keep my end up, but Trixie's enthusiasm would not be obscured by verbal commonplaces. 'Slaves of the light fantastic,' I added. Trixie shuddered slightly, and still refused to be damped down. In the end she persuaded me to write to a teacher of Russian dancing who advertised locally. Thus I took the first constructive step I had ever taken on behalf of my family, and Trixie was started on her career.

'Am I straight on the paper?' I asked, as she brought me my pen.

'Yes, daddy.' There was no mistaking the eagerness in

her voice. Would she be bringing the house down in a few years' time? Would there be any houses to bring down by then?

In the evenings Una used to read the newspaper to me, but we soon gave that up because I could not recognize my well-known journal. One eye's pickings were different from another's, and Una's selections left me unsatisfied. Instead we read books, and through the slow process of listening I entered worlds that were unknown to me. Once when Una was reading a novel about a girl called Elsie, who had just given her true love the air without apparent reason, I stopped her and said:

'Why do you suppose Elsie did that?'

'Well, it's in the story.'

'Is that sufficient reason? No girl could behave like that in real life. Either she loved the fellow and would have stuck to him, or she did not, in which case the story is false.'

'What a hopelessly male point of view,' Una said. 'Besides, a story's a story, it's not real life, is it?'

I had always gone all the way with the heroes and heroines of my fiction; if I were to regard them henceforward as episodes in a story, why, I asked myself, should these books be written? And how could the authors, in Elsie's case the authoress, accept such an arbitrary yet fateful responsibility?

'If it's not real life,' I said aloud, 'then the author must have an ulterior motive. And I can only think of one. Propaganda.'

'Why not entertainment?'

'Entertainment and uplift are the mild British forms of the disease. Propaganda for a point of view or a way of life.'

'Propaganda's an ugly word,' Una said. 'Let's call it education.'

'Whenever I hear the word "education" I reach for my fountain pen,' I said. 'But I didn't mean to interrupt you,' and she went on reading.

My attention began to wander from Elsie's predicament. If novelists were teachers, I thought, I was over school age. I did in fact reach for my fountain pen, and my fingers closed on it. Una must have noticed the gesture, for she stopped reading, and brought me some paper which she arranged conveniently for me.

'The day of the funeral dawned bright and cold,' I wrote when she had left the room. So began the trickle of ink that has turned into this manuscript. Was I then setting myself up as a teacher? Heaven forbid. The way that I could show through the tangle, twisting, turning, doubling back on its tracks, could be of interest only by contrast with the tourist routes. 'No Thoroughfare,' 'Sens Interdit,' 'Trespassers will be Prosecuted'—these would be the notices that those who followed my track would read on their journey to the interior sanctuary.

Nevertheless it might be interesting to some to follow the gyrations of the hedgehog rather than the luminous way of the saint, if my fountain pen could force a path. I plunged farther into the undergrowth. No consistent plan or pattern was visible. It was not to be expected. I needed a bill-hook, rather than a fountain pen.

The snow came early that year, and I could imagine the white expanse outside, burying impartially open field, foot-path, and cart-track. The landscape had become smaller and neater overnight, with telegraph poles, railway lines, farmsteads, rivulets, and banked roadways picked out as in a school wall-picture. Through Trixie's eyes I saw the foregrounds, clumsy tussocks of grass, the thick hedges, the weighty eaves of cottage roofs, the lidded gates and gate-posts, and sometimes as we walked I would brush my face against a laden twig. We heard the squeak of our feet in the new snow, and behind us we left our trail of footprints, with a little hole beside each of mine, no doubt, for my stick. Behind my black glasses the pervading whiteness reached

me. I felt that if I chose to do so I could turn on a switch inside my head and flood myself with light.

For an instant my eyes opened behind their glasses, and the aching balls stared into the whiteness. Opposite me soared a great elm-tree, naked for the winter, its trunks, main arteries, ready to lift the sap to the network of branches and twigs, veins and capillaries of the organism.

In a drear-nighted December,
Too happy, happy tree,
Thy branches ne'er remember
Their green felicity.

CHAPTER XX

Rose and the Organist

ONE morning when the snow was down I was walking along the road on Una's arm.

'There's someone over there who seems to know you,' she said.

'Where?' I asked.

'Over there, by the bus stop.'

'Describe her,' I said.

'A young woman.'

This much I had inferred from Una's manner. A troupe of girls danced before my eyes. I felt like Mr. Cochran about to choose a young lady.

I had never thought much of Una's powers of description, but on this occasion, with a few rapid strokes, she etched a brunette, modest in being yet conspicuous, dressed in meagre black clothes which looked as if they might slip off at a moment's notice. Probably I blushed. As we passed the corner where the young woman was standing I screwed

up my courage and called out in a steady voice: 'Is that you, Rose?'

It was. We stopped, and I introduced my wife.

'Pleased to meet you,' Rose said.

She was evacuated from Poplar, and had found a job in a factory near by. Alec, she told me, had joined the Navy, and was expected on leave soon. The machine-gunning, Alec said, was worse than the bombing. They had a job to keep them off sometimes. Must do, we agreed.

Una asked her to tea on the following Sunday, and she accepted.

'Who is she?' Una inquired, when we were out of ear-shot, 'and who is Alec?'

I told her, throwing my secretiveness to the winds, or about fifty per cent of it. 'And you still want her to tea?'

'Of course.'

Una suggested that we might ask someone else to the party. That was a good idea, and we tried without success to think of a suitable guest. Eventually the problem was solved for us by the arrival of a Mr. Maréchal, the organist at the village church, who had been given an introduction to us by the vicar, on the ground that I should like to 'talk music' with him.

'Mr. Maréchal explained the charitable nature of his visit to me at our front door.

'It is very kind of you, Mr. Maréchal,' I said as we shook hands.

He pressed my hand with firm insensitive fingers, so firmly that my open diapason spoke.

'Excuse me,' I murmured, 'do come in.'

'Not at all, Mr. . . . er . . .'

'Empresson.'

'Not at all, Mr. Preston. A pleasure, I am sure.'

I had the impression of a small man, with a large waft of beer.

Soon afterwards Rose arrived, and I wondered acutely what she looked like. Una told me later that she was dressed in a thin black dress, which suited her very well, and black artificial silk stockings. Her dress was much too thin for the cold weather, and her cheap high-heeled shoes were useless against our country roads.

Rose's voice was low and husky—I had not noticed it before—and Mr. Maréchal spoke with a trace of foreign accent, though his English was colloquial, a bit too colloquial for my taste. It was jarring to sit there and listen to his glib phrases just missing the mark, and to hear his confident mangling of our basic English.

Rose did not seem to mind, however, and it was soon obvious from Mr. Maréchal's behaviour that she was still the same Rose, and had lost none of her speed off the mark. His attention to Una's overtures and mine was perfunctory, and his eye was evidently on our guest. Not that Rose said anything much to him—her gifts did not lie that way—but she used other methods. Her first direct remark to him was when Una asked if she would like to look round the house.

'I don't mind,' she said, and as they left the room threw out in passing: 'Well, chin-chin, Mr. Maréchal, I'll be seeing you.'

This sudden advance so captivated Mr. Maréchal that he could barely stay in the room with me. However, politeness forced him to do so.

'That's a damn fine girl,' he said, when the ladies had gone.

'Which are you referring to, Una or Rose?'

'Don't be daft,' he said tactlessly.

'Will you have a drop of whisky?' I asked.

'I don't mind,' he said, echoing Rose.

'I don't either,' I said; 'help yourself,' and pushed the bottle towards him.

I heard him pour out a tot, a stiff one judging by the gurgle.

'Water?' I suggested, to eke out my supplies.

'No, thanks. Just as it comes,' the same formula as he had used when Una had asked him how he liked his tea.

'We would be very pleased to see Mrs. Maréchal any time—are you a married man, by the way?'

'Good heavens, no.' He leaned over and put his face close to mine. His halitosis nearly stunned me. 'There's only one thing to do with women,' he said confidentially.

'What's that?' I asked.

'Run. Run like hell.' He laughed at what was obviously one of his stock remarks.

'Do you put your precept into practice?'

'No, I don't. That's the trouble.' He leant even closer, and I had the impression that his teeth were widely spaced. They must have been, I am sure. 'I'd be a better man if I had. Take that woman down the road, for example. I expect you've noticed her, Mrs. Minor, a lovely bit of work—on the surface.'

'Quite,' I said, pointing to my glasses.

The Minors were our most respectable neighbours, and we had been asked to supper there that very evening. I must have smiled, because Mr. Maréchal said: 'What, is the old girl after you, too?'

'Are you a pianist?' I asked, changing the subject and indicating my Bechstein grand with a wave of the hand.

He went to the piano and gave a tough but able performance of a Bach fugue. He had the brutally practical attitude that belongs to the organist, the mechanized unit of music. He told me that his living was from a cinema organ near by.

'It must be odd, stepping from the cinema to the church,' I said.

He spat out something he had unearthed between his teeth. 'It doesn't trouble me, Mr. Preston.'

The ladies came back. 'Play us *Tiger Rag*, Mr. Maréchal,' Rose asked.

He did so, and set the weak spots in my piano rattling and clanging, then went on to a mixed repertory, sacred and profane. Rose was evidently entranced. I could hear her foot tapping the rhythms on our wooden floor.

Rose rose. 'Rose is going,' Una said to me.

Mr. Maréchal leapt to his feet. 'I must be getting, too,' he said.

I put a word in his ear as he shook hands to my good-bye. 'Don't forget your advice when you get outside.'

'What's that?'

'Run. Run like hell.'

'Aw!' he said.

We heard of him again that very evening. It is odd how these foreign-looking men get away with it where women are concerned. Mr. Maréchal was evidently no exception, despite his dark and dirty appearance, small feet, and striped trousers. Even Una talked about him so much that I began to lose confidence in the British bathroom.

We went to supper with the Minors, who lived in a square house, about a quarter of a mile down the road from us. I was sure that there must be a good view from the Minors' living-room because the garden sloped steeply down to the road, and said as much to Mr. Minor, who was surprised that I should think of it after dark. He agreed that the view was splendid, and one of the chief attractions of the house.

Mrs. Minor and my wife were talking over the fire, and Mr. Minor, who was a classical scholar, began to quote Horace. In his hot pursuit of Latin tags he did not notice that my attention was gripped elsewhere.

Through the window the open country rose gently. I saw a figure lying face downwards in the snow. A small crowd dressed in overcoats and leggings, with heads wrapped in furs and scarves, had collected. As I watched, a doctor arrived and began to give artificial respiration. The doctor was a young man, bare-headed in the cold, and his face was pale with concentration. His prominent teeth were especially noticeable in profile, and his hair, parted in the middle, fell over his forehead. His thin eager figure was in striking contrast to the muffled spectators.

Mr. Minor offered me a whisky. I heard the soda splashed in, and was about to abandon the scene I was watching when I heard him address Una. They discovered a common interest, and he launched on a holiday reminiscence.

'The path goes straight up the shoulder of the mountain,' he said, 'by the white posts. It's very steep—must be nearly forty-five degrees—the steepest green mountain I know.'

'Yes,' Una said. 'I remember it well. It's slippery in dry weather.'

I went on looking out of my window at the scene outside, which was growing more tense. The doctor had taken his overcoat off, even in that cold, and was putting everything into his work. Someone brought lanterns. With night-fall the cold had set in like iron.

'The sun blazes on that mountain-side,' Mr. Minor went on. 'The path's on the south side, and it's positively dangerous except in the early morning. Yet they have, or used to have, crowds of tourists.'

'I suppose there'll be a road there one day,' Una said. 'Round and round the mountain, like the Puy de Dôme.'

From my wife's words rose a symmetrical mountain, like Fujiyama without its snow, green and conical and sun-warmed, scented with thyme and heather. The short turf

would be springy. Simultaneously I watched the flat snow outside and the black figures in attitudes of expectancy. 'Vultures,' I thought, 'vultures on the steppes.'

The victim twitched. A movement passed through the crowd. They closed round the prostrate man. It was evident that life was being restored.

Our hostess rose from her chair. She was at a disadvantage because the travel reminiscences were from her husband's bachelor days.

'Let us draw the heavy curtains,' she said, 'it is horribly cold, and it will help to keep the room warm. Also it will shut out that scene outside.'

'What scene?' I asked, startled.

'That desolate wintry scene.' She shivered.

Mrs. Minor drew the curtains, and I heard the brass rings jingle together. At this signal my wife, and Mr. Minor came down from their mountain, so to speak, and the green, sun-baked cone vanished from the interior of the room.

'Will you sit here?' our hostess said to Una; 'and you here?' Mrs. Minor led me to my seat. 'Draw up now. Randolph will wait on us. It's all cold, I'm afraid. Randolph, everything is ready, there on the side table.'

Mr. Minor stood at the sideboard and carved the chicken. 'Your drink is beside you, Empresson,' he said to me.

I reached for my whisky and soda, and my fingers closed gratefully round the tumbler.

'It's the coldest December I remember in this country,' I said to our hostess, 'and that goes back a good many years.' I was still thinking of the scene outside the window.

Mrs. Minor was not interested in the weather, apparently; she said 'Yes' and moved the baked potatoes, at which I was probably gazing greedily, in a way that showed her mind to be elsewhere.

My wife backed me up. 'It's weird to see people in this village, in England, going about muffled up in furs and top-boots and ear-flaps. It might be Russia or Finland—or one of those arctic countries,' she added, realizing the incompatibility. One could not then bracket Russia and Finland.

Mr. Minor brought Una her plate of cold chicken. 'Yes,' he said politely, 'our doctor tells me that we are beginning to exhibit arctic symptoms. In our efforts to carry on normal life we suffer from exhaustion.'

'What is his remedy?'

'Practically to hibernate.'

'That appeals to me,' Una said. 'Who is this doctor?'

'Doctor Desalis. Don't you know him? A pale young man with a sharp nose, and hair parted in the middle.' Mr. Minor spoke from the sideboard, where he was carving the final portion.

'Doesn't sound much like a doctor,' my wife said.

'Why not?' Mr. Minor asked. He was interested. I had the impression that his wife's conversation did not normally interest him.

'Take no notice of Randolph,' Mrs. Minor put in, 'his descriptions are not reliable.'

'How does Doctor Desalis appear to you, then, Mrs. Minor?' I asked out of devilment.

'Oh, I don't know. Not a bit like that. He is eager and his hair is brushed back.'

This gave me an entirely different picture. I could smell the brilliantine.

Mr. Minor took his seat at the table. 'But even if you have your hair brushed back, it can fall forward, for example, when you're working with concentration on something,' he said amicably.

Mrs. Minor was a trifle irritated. 'Yes, of course, but doctors don't always concentrate feverishly.'

'They often have to,' Mr. Minor said. 'At confinements, for example.'

The atmosphere was uncomfortable. I remembered my wife telling me that the Minors had no children.

'Or when there are accidents,' I heard Una saying. 'Imagine the concentration needed for artificial respiration.' What was she getting at? I felt more united with her than I ever had.

'I remember seeing artificial respiration tried once,' Mr. Minor said, imperturbably. Reminiscence was his social small change. 'A young girl was carried out of her depth bathing. They fished her out, and a doctor worked on her on the ground. She lay there like a lump. A fat girl of about fifteen or sixteen.' Behind his description I saw the sea gleaming and the gentle breakers on the bathing sands. 'Eventually the doctor gave up, and they covered the poor body; then they carried her away, feet first.' And when she was gone the summer sea would be still gleaming and breaking, regardless of the dastardly deed it has just done.

Just then there was a sharp knock at the door below. Mrs. Minor went out and we heard low voices. In a few moments she reappeared.

'There's been an accident. A man collapsed in the snow.'

'Have they sent for the doctor?' Mr. Minor asked.

'Yes, he wants to know if we'll take the man in here.'

'Is it any one we know?'

Mrs. Minor hesitated a moment. 'Yes, it's Mr. Maréchal.'

Mr. Minor jumped to his feet. 'I won't have that fellow in my house, not at any price.'

'Randolph!' Mrs. Minor's voice was charged with hatred.

'I won't have that drunken sot here, doctor or no doctor.'

'Randolph, what are you saying! I will not have Mr. Maréchal maligned by you or any one else.'

'All right, all right, all right,' Mr. Minor said, trying to


regain his nerve. 'The fellow's nothing to me. As a matter of fact I haven't seen him for months.'

'But I have,' Mrs. Minor blazed out. 'If you want to know, I saw him only an hour ago.'

There was an embarrassing silence. Una and I were strangers to the Minors, and there was nothing we could say. Their supper party lay in ruins. We sat there, each chasing our own thoughts, as if we had been suddenly plunged into a deep green wood, each to hack a way for himself or herself through the tangle of undergrowth.

For my part I was amazed that Mr. Maréchal, from what I knew of him, could have caused such a flutter. 'Run, run like hell,' I thought of him saying. Was he running when the snow got him? Una's usual self-possession must have gone, because I heard her murmur in a shocked voice: 'An hour ago? Just before we came, do you mean?'

Mrs. Minor was too rattled to speak. Whether she wanted to go out to Mr. Maréchal or not, I cannot say. She did not go, and we tried to save something from the wreckage of the evening. Mrs. Minor had a carefully prepared sweet and coffee to follow, all wasted because we were too pre-occupied to taste what we were eating. The conversation nervously followed conventional lines, each of us making attempts to raise hares, but the breach between the Minors was 'too gaping to be camouflaged, and after the shortest interval we could decently allow Una and I made our escape.



CHAPTER XXI

A Display of Temper

PASSING the letter-box one morning I felt in it and found a letter. I asked Una who it was for.

'It's for you, from the firm.'

'Oh,' I said apologetically; 'have you time to read it?'

The letter was from him of the gold rims and benign expression. Most tactfully worded, it informed me that my colleagues were dividing my work between them, pending my return in the, it was to be hoped, not too distant future. Meanwhile my salary would continue to be paid at the half-rate I had agreed on. 'In the event of your disability proving more serious than is at present envisaged it would, of course, in the interests of the business, be necessary to arrange for your work to be done by someone else, in which event, seeing that you are a victim of enemy action, an application for compensation should be made to the proper authorities.'

'There's a sentence for you,' I interrupted.

Una made no comment.

'There's a sentence for you,' I shouted, 'wrapped up in their bloody business English. What the hell do they mean? "In the event of your disability proving more serious than is at present envisaged." What does that gold-rimmed, white-haired old — mean?' My voice rose to a scream. 'My sight's going to be all right. A damn sight better than theirs. I'll show them. I'll live for eight hundred years, like Nebuchadnezzar . . .'

'You can't have it every way?' Una pointed out.

'How do you mean?'

'You can't recover your sight and live to be eight hundred, and be pensioned for life and everything.'

I hadn't a leg to stand on. My rage fumed inside me. I heard no sound except my own breathing, and I thought of a whipped horse, blowing through its nostrils. I strolled to the telephone and asked for Bell & Otley's Nottingham number.

'All junctions to Nottingham engaged. Shall I rrring you?'

'Damn,' I said.

'Who do you think you're talking to? I shall report you to the supervisor.'

I climbed down. 'Yes, ring without fail, will you?'

I waited while the minutes slipped and dodged by me, with their little ticks and rustles. Inside my head bands of light stood out, like interference fringes in a spectroscope. At last the telephone bell rang.

'Your Nottingham number. Go ahead, Caxton.'

'Thank you,' I said. 'Hallo!'

'Bell & Otley.' I recognized the disillusioned voice of 'Will' Anson, and could smell the dust and the dead men's papers.

'Can I speak to Mr. Bell?'

'Who is it, please?'

'Mr. Empresson. E-M-P-R-E double S-O-N.'

'Mr. Empresson? Oh, yes, of course, Mr. Empresson junior.'

'No,' I said. 'Mr. Empresson.'

'Hold the line, please.'

After a short delay, I heard a well-modulated voice, fresh as the morning, speaking in the confident tone of one who represents himself.

'Hallo!'

'Empresson speaking,' I said.

'Oh, yes, my dear chap. This is Bell here. How are you, my dear fellow?'

'Fine, how are you? I want to speak to you . . .'

'I was so distressed, my dear fellow, so terribly distressed to hear of your misfortune. I, er . . .'

'I want to speak to you about that five thousand pounds. I have decided to put the matter in your hands.'

'Splendid, my dear fellow. That is your father's son. Nothing could give me greater pleasure.'

There was a short pause.

'And there's one other thing,' I went on. 'How much is the mortgage on the Empresson business?'

He told me.

'Call it in at once,' I said.

'But my dear fellow, it will put you out of business. It would be most unwise. Most unwise. Not to say ruinous. Moreover, I doubt if it is legal in wartime.'

'Do as I ask,' I said.

'But wait a moment. This will not do, Empresson. I must have the written consent of the shareholders.'

'Do as I tell you,' I said. 'Get over the difficulties. I put it up to you.'

At that moment the pips went. 'Do you want another call?' the exchange inquired.

'No, thank you, I think that will be all,' said Bell in his clear, efficient voice.

'Lay off,' I shouted. 'Is this your call or mine? Another three minutes please, Exchange.'

Bell was on the run, while heartily disapproving of my unprofessional methods.

'Is that enough for you to go on?' I asked.

'I will think it over, Empresson, and write to you.'

'Don't think,' I said. 'Act. Get on with it.'

'Seeing we are talking like this,' he said, 'and mind you, but for your father I would put down this receiver and never speak to you again . . .'

'My God, my father . . .'

'Seeing we are talking like this, there is one thing perhaps

I ought to tell you. I did not tell you before, because you did not make your own position clear.'

'How do you mean?'

'Your father, ahem, had certain wishes about the future of his firm. They were the principal object of his visit to Nottingham, just before his death. He left me discretion in certain respects—I make it a rule not to mention these matters on the telephone, you understand . . .'

'Quite.' Bell was obviously about to divulge.

'He wished me to disclose his provisions only if you showed sufficient interest in the affairs of the firm.'

'Oh!' I said. I was surprised at the implied delicacy of feeling on my father's part.

'Under these circumstances, do you still wish me to proceed with the redemption of the mortgage?'

'Yes,' I said violently. 'I am going to be under no man's hand, dead or alive.'

'It is not a question of being under any one's hand. On the contrary, Empresson, your father, who was a most admirable man in every way . . .'

'So different from his son.'

'Your father, who was a most admirable man, and a good business man, too, made arrangements whereby you could regain control of the business, should you at any time evince a positive desire to do so.'

'Well, I'm damned,' I said. I was beginning to feel exceedingly positive. 'And who is to be the judge of that?'

'I am.'

'The old ——! You mean that he has established a fund for that very purpose?'

'Exactly.'

I was amazed at my father's precaution on my behalf. He had always given me the impression that as far as the business was concerned I was free to come or go, make or mar it, at my pleasure. That he should have secretly

created this reserve warmed my heart to him. It showed me how much he cared for his name. It outlined his self-respect, which would not allow him, at the last, to trust even his own son. Yet the impact on me was as private as a blood inheritance.

'I have nothing more to say,' I said. And immediately added: 'And the Smallwood legacy, by the way? Did he discuss that too on his last visit?'

'No. Such private arrangements he kept entirely to himself. I shall investigate that matter, you understand, purely from the legal aspect, and when I find the strength of our case, I shall advise you.'

'Your time is up, Caxton. Do you want another call?'

'No, thank you,' I said. 'That will be all. Well, good-bye, Bell.'

'Good-bye, Empresson, er—good-bye, my dear fellow.'

At breakfast I was so irritated that I seized my plate of porridge and milk and threw it in Una's direction. I missed, imagined her shocked eyes, and heard the china smash on the tiled floor. Una moved towards me.

'Leave me alone, for God's sake,' I said. 'Isn't it bad enough for me to be blind?' and on an impulse I tilted the table. All the things rolled off, our coffee pot and milk jug, our plates, our butter dish and jam jar. It was a shocking mess.

I heard Trixie crying in the bedroom. Una did not speak to me. I went up to her and touched her. We had none of us had anything to eat, and the breakfast she had got together lay in ruins. I saw the enormity of my offence.

'I'm terribly sorry, Una,' I said.

She was crying in a controlled way. 'It's not you, Phil,' she blurted, 'but it's all our things. Our plates and our coffee pot and our jugs and everything—all gone. I can't bear it.'

Una's concern for our property touched me so nearly that I began to weep myself. I could hear her scrabbling on the floor for the pieces, and the chink of broken china in the dustpan. Then she went outside and threw a shower of crockery into the dustbin. The bang of the lid buried the incident, and a large proportion of our china.

I went into Trixie's room and tried to take her out of herself.

'Breakfast-time, Trixie,' I said. 'Show a leg, there.'

I had no success. She would not even speak to me. I was so alarmed at my failure to make contact that I went out of the room. I could hear Una still at work on the mess in the kitchen. Then she would get a second breakfast, presumably. No doubt of it crossed my mind.

I opened a window to feel the weather. It was undoubtedly warmer. The wind was from the south, still carrying soft flakes of snow or sleet, but very different from the icy wisps of the north. I could hear the wind increasing, moaning in the trees. Soon it would roar, sweeping the miles of snow before it, a mighty force, ridiculing the puny efforts of nations to lay each other waste.

Trixie called me from her bedroom. 'What's the difference between nought and one?' she asked me. She did not seem annoyed, and I wondered if I had been panicky.

'Is it a riddle?'

'Yes.'

'One,' I answered.

'No, that's not the answer, you goose.'

'But it is,' I said, then realized that possibly it wasn't. If I could announce the difference between nought and one, I should know the secret of the universe, the difference between not being and being. 'Minus one,' I tried, esoterically.

'Wrong.'

'Give it up,' I said.

'No, you have to say you don't know, you see, then I say . . .'

'Oh, it's one of those miserable catches. I don't see why I should play into your hands.'

'Oh, daddy!'

'All right. I don't know. . . .'

We were interrupted by the entrance of Una. I glanced nervously in her direction, as if I could see her expression. I had the impression of a rectangle of light, and of Una moving in it.

I waited for her to speak. Was she going to kick over the traces?

'Breakfast is ready, you two,' she said.

'Scraped off the floor?' I inquired.

'Don't wait for me. I'm going to light a fire in the sitting-room.'

CHAPTER XXII

A Look into the Future

'WHAT is that doctor's telephone number?' I called out.

'Who do you mean?'

'Doctor Desalis. The man the Minors were talking about the other night.'

'Will after breakfast do?'

'No, I want it now.'

Una looked it up for me. I asked for the number, and a vigorous voice the other end said: 'Hallo!'

'Is that Doctor Desalis?'

'Yes, speaking.' I was attracted by the level tone of the voice.

I explained who I was and where I lived, and what my

principal trouble was. As I spoke every organ in my body seemed to exhibit some symptom that needed a doctor's attention.

'I'll call during the day,' he said, and rang off.

'Daddy,' Trixie called from the kitchen, 'who were you talking to?'

'The doctor,' I said.

'Oh!'

It was evening before I heard a knock at the front door. I went and opened. Doctor Desalis was standing there.

'Mr. Empresson?' he inquired.

'Yes. Come in, doctor.'

I felt that I knew him well, a pale young man, with a sharp nose and hair parted in the middle, or an eager young man with hair brushed back, whereas he had no idea who I was.

'I've seen you about the village,' he said.

This put me at my ease and I said that I had heard of him through the Minors in connection with Mr. Maréchal. 'What happened to Mr. Maréchal, by the way, is he all right?' I asked.

He made no direct answer, and I realized that he would not talk about his patients' affairs. This gave me confidence in him.

'Rough weather,' he said, and went out to the porch to shake the snow from his coat and hat.

I remarked that it was a little warmer now that the snow had come.

'Possibly,' he agreed. 'The roads are a sheet of ice.'

'Are they?'

He must have glanced at my glasses, for I felt his professional interest. I heard Una coming through the hall.

'This is Doctor Desalis,' I said; 'my wife.'

Una conducted him to our bedroom.

'You'll find us with our trousers down,' I apologized.

He said 'Yes' without the slightest sign of interest. I realized that he did not care whether we wore trousers or not. To him one end of the body was as presentable as the other, and what we did, and at which end, was of scientific rather than moral interest. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. One illness after another came to my mind, each more deadly than the last, until it seemed impossible for any one to survive in this dangerous world. And how could the human frame be expected to withstand the processes of laying waste and elimination envisaged by our opposing High Command? It could not, moreover did not, beyond a certain point, as the infantry, the rank and file know well.

My bowels turned to water while I described the concussion, and the subsequent symptoms.

'Can you see at all?'

I hesitated in the evening darkness. What was that rectangle of light I had seen behind Una in the morning? When I did not speak the doctor said:

'You had better come round to my surgery. I have my ophthalmoscope there, and can examine you. Let me see, when shall we say?'

My heart beat quickly. For months I had postponed this issue, and at the last moment I would have evaded it if I could.

'It is difficult for me to find my way, unless my wife is to come with me. . . .'

The doctor evidently realized the practical problem. 'Come now,' he said; 'I can give you a lift in my car. Will you?'

My position was rushed by his speed. 'I must ask my wife,' I said.

'I'll see her about it.'

While I waited the brilliant blackness of doubt assailed me. I stared into the darkness.

Una came in and helped me into my winter coat. I could not tell what she was thinking. 'Good luck,' she whispered.

Taking the doctor's arm, I stepped out into the snow. He led me to his car. I heard him press the self-starter and put the gear in. We drove away, tyres hissing.

As soon as I was seated in his consulting room Doctor Desalis told me to remove my dark glasses. He wanted to watch my expression, he said, but did not in the first place examine my eyes.

'You're very welcome, I'm sure,' I said, and then went straight to the point, as I thought. 'Is it possible for blindness such as mine to be cured?'

'It is possible,' he said, 'for a person to lose his sight completely as a result of bomb concussion, and to recover completely afterwards, if the loss of sight is hysterical.'

He paused, and I encouraged him to go on.

'Blindness from physical causes after concussion is rare.'

'And . . .?'

'And if it occurs, recovery is unlikely.'

I asked him to explain what he meant by 'hysterical.'

'A hysterical paralysis is of mental origin; it expresses a subconscious wish to avoid acting in a particular way.'

Although these remarks seemed to me to have only the most distant reference to my case, I was aware of a growing excitement. Here, I knew, was something for me. I grasped the thread he threw me.

He went on to talk about the structure of the mind, and the relationship between emotion and action. As he spoke I saw a sphere in my mind's eye, of which the outer surface only was visible, the inner structure suggesting the darkness of deep water. At one moment this sphere seemed to be of astronomical dimensions, a huge affair with distant but definite and attainable frontiers, at another to shrink to the size of my own eyeball.

'Now,' he said, 'let me examine you.'

He fixed his ophthalmoscope, and I knew when the little light was turned on. He made a long and careful examination of both eyes before speaking again.

'There is no change in the structure of the apparatus of sight,' he said.

'What does that mean?' I asked. 'You say no change, but you have not seen my outfit before.'

'There is no deterioration from what I have learned to regard as the normal structure.'

'And . . .?'

'And your sight will therefore return. You can be sure.'

Immediately a world of vision began to stretch before me.

'Throw away those glasses,' he said. 'You have no need of them.'

I jumped to my feet as if I would walk home.

'I do not know how to thank you,' I said, and held out my hand.

'Allow me to take you home.'

Next morning I awoke to a wall of greyness. I got out of bed and went to the window.

'I can see,' I said. Una came to my side. 'I can see a grey light, but nothing more.'

'That's not surprising,' she said, 'there's a thick fog. I put my arms round her, and could feel in the droop of her shoulders the weight she had been carrying for us three.'

As the light gained power I began to see the black shapes of the trees looming out of the mist. The need for action tingled in my veins.

'Now we can begin again,' Una whispered. Indeed I began again by looking squarely at her. 'Can you not see in me the girl you married?' the cast-off wife asks her husband in the Sunday papers. 'Yes, I can, and very little else,' would have been my answer then to such a question. Una was Una and always would be. By no effort of will or imagination could I add a cubit to her stature. Alterations

and repairs henceforward were outside my function. I relaxed my efforts, and Una and the rest of my visual world slipped into their channels again.

I was shocked at Trixie's appearance, not because of her remembered looks, which more or less tallied, but because she was a stranger to me. The tail of her little past stretched behind her, vivid in her own eyes, invisible to mine. I could see her self-consciousness, as when one meets a stranger who, outwardly unimpressive, says by his manner: 'Don't you realize that I am the man who did so-and-so?' For once I shed my own past in order to approach her unencumbered. 'Trixie,' I said, 'Trixie dear, how are you?' and put my hand on the knot of her forehead. The lopping off of my yards of self-pity was a useless sacrifice as far as Trixie was concerned, because she did not come out to meet me. She huddled defiantly behind her eyes. 'Don't you realize what you have done to me,' they said.

I paced round the house observing irrelevant points. The furniture that I knew well enough had taken a new lease of life since its move, and had recovered from the raging quarrels of our early married days. One chair, with a wicker seat and black frame, a wedding present to Una from her mother, I had once resented so strongly that I had peremptorily ordered Una to turn it out of the house. This order, regardless of her marriage vows, she had not carried out, and I had smashed the arm with a hammer. Una must have repaired it unknown to me, for here it was again, its arm neatly bound up, coolly inviting me to sit on it. I accepted the invitation and found myself looking out of the window at the elms in front of the house.

I took my hat and coat and went outside. The fog had lifted and it was a clear, dark morning, comparatively mild after the snow. It was half-past seven, half-past six by the still absent sun. An old half-moon hung jauntily, with the blatancy of the elderly. I stepped out, swinging my

arms and inhaling the dawn air. At first I was alone, but after a few yards I had the impression of being surrounded by a little crowd, as if I were personally conducting a ramble. Trixie ran on ahead, Una was beside me, Beatrice pleaded with me, Sammy Blundel shared my exhilaration, and unexpectedly my cousin Millicent arrived, looking flushed and excited. Alec and his sister Rose were somewhere in the party. We clattered along together, rousing the village. I needed urgently to be alone, and the cross-currents set up by this miscellaneous and incompatible assortment were such that I put my hands to my ears and ran into the church, like Thomas à Becket seeking sanctuary. They came in with me and stumped about the wooden pews. The various desires of their hearts were so conflicting that I thought my head would burst. I realized that I had better hand over their problems to one in a better position to deal with them, and flung myself on my knees.

The crowd left me then, and when I opened my eyes I began to see the shapes inside the darkened church. Candles were lit at the altar, screened in accordance with the black-out regulations, and their light was just enough to cast a glimmer on the plastered walls of the nave and to indicate the shape of the thick stone pillars. I rose from my knees and strolled round the building. I was used, since my blindness, to moving in the dark, and I felt my way to the tower, where the bell ropes were tied up pending invasion, then to the font, then to the octagonal pulpit. From time to time my feet rang on the brass plate of a brother one hundred, two hundred, three hundred years ahead. It was too dark to read the inscriptions. I went to the altar rail, saw on the left a crib ready for the coming Christmas services, shared for a moment Joseph's anxiety, his wonder at the miracle, his thankfulness for his Mary's relief from the solitary journey of pain. To every parent his child is the child of God.

I prayed again, acknowledging and bemoaning my manifold sins and wickedness. I was not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs. I rose from my knees, brushing the crumbs from my coat and trousers, and fished in my pocket for a coin to put in the alms-box. Sixpence came out, and I was about to drop it in when it struck me as being inadequate. I found half a crown. What relation did that bear to my debt? Unable to assess a fee, I poured in all the loose change I had, and left the church.

In the churchyard I met the vicar, Father Bennett, on his way to the eight o'clock service. He was wearing hat and cassock, and beneath his skirt his thick well-polished shoes gleamed respectably in the dawn light.

'Good morning,' he said.

I returned the compliment. Obviously he did not know who I was. He must often have been in this position, and his technique was well adapted.

'It looks like a green Christmas,' I said. The full churchyard round me applauded this remark.

'Yes, indeed.' The priest paused, leaving it to me to make the running.

'We are newcomers here, my wife and myself, and our little daughter. We were bombed out—or rather I was.' I missed the evidence of my dark glasses.

'Oh, indeed? I am sorry to hear that.'

'Yes, very sad,' I found myself saying. A tombstone rounded at the top rose out of the dark, 'in ever loving memory.' My eyes filled with tears, whether for my mother or my father or myself I do not know. 'Arise, shine,' I read, 'for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.'

'The—er—name?'

'Empresson.' Now I was thinking of my father. I was proud of him and his name.

'Oh, yes, of course. The Minors have told me about you. And the little girl's age is . . .?'

'Ten. Eleven, I should say.'

'Eleven. Yes, I see.' His eyes lit up with the celibate's love for children. 'You must send her to join our youth group. They meet in my study.' I had heard tell of his study, a room furnished with books, a camp bed, and a wicker arm-chair, and a grate littered with cigarette ends, the sort of conditions that women compare to a pigsty and men to a common-room. He shook hands and we parted. At the gate I met a schoolboy on a bicycle. He was pale and bare-kneed. Father Bennett must have great influence with him, I thought, to get him out of bed at that time in the morning on the Sunday before Christmas. A little elderly lady hurried down the road, carrying a prayer book. Behind her was Mrs. Minor, tall, fur-wrapped. Further up the road Mr. Maréchal, the organist, passed me, and with him, to my astonishment, was Rose.

The frost came in again before Christmas, in time to whiten the grass and the straw and to make the roads ring. One afternoon I heard a resolute knock at our front door, and opened it to see the black-coated figure of the Reverend Cyril Smallwood. The cold had made him more pink-and-white than ever, the pink being a shade darker than usual.

'Oh, come in,' I said.

He stamped the frost from his shoes.

'Thank you, er, Empresson. I found myself in the neighbourhood, and I thought I would call in person to discuss our little difference of opinion.'

Little you call it, I thought, a mere five thousand pounds, and said: 'Very kind of you. Do sit down.' I waited for him to speak. I thought I might as well have my five thousand pounds' worth.

'My sister wishes to put the matter in legal hands. But I thought before she did so I would come to see you. Surely

there is no need, among friends, for there to be unpleasantness.'

'Friends?'

'Quite, quite, Mr. Empresson. I felt that some friendly arrangement, some compromise might be indicated?'

'Your sister wants to go to law?' I asked.

'Yes.'

'Well, tell her to get on with it.'

The look of Christian charity vanished from Mr. Smallwood's face. I tried to read his expression. It was one of loathing for me. He had come a long way to see me, on a cold day, prepared to give me, out of his charity, say a thousand pounds, I should never know how much, and had had no chance even to make his offer. His anger made him look physically ill.

'In that case there is not much point in my staying any longer.'

'Una,' I called, hearing her step, 'this is Mr. Smallwood who buried my father.'

This introduction threw them both off their balance. The Rev. Smallwood forgot his manners for once, and shook the dust of our house from his feet, ignoring Una entirely, and Una, unable to intervene to save our fortune, at a time when our resources were nil, was left with nothing more satisfying than to demand an explanation from me.

I pointed out that I had refused a bribe of a thousand pounds, for the doubtful pleasure of showing Mr. Smallwood the door.

Maybe I exaggerated. Or, to put it another way, maybe I lied. My role by this account sounded more dramatic than it actually was. However, Una knew me, and I felt that it was her business to sort out the news from the propaganda. I soon found that her concern as to what happened to the legacy was of secondary interest compared with the future of the Empresson business. In this, as I

have since discovered, she must have had my financial as well as my moral welfare at heart.

Our discussions were interrupted by the sight of Mr. Maréchal in our front garden. With him was Rose. It was Una's turn to be astonished.

'Good morning,' one of us said; 'the compliments of the season.'

'That's right,' Mr. Maréchal said; 'the same to you, and many of 'em.'

'So you were at your seat the other morning, Mr. Maréchal,' I ventured.

'Yes, that's right. Hardly worth it, just to play a hymn. No one wants it so early.'

'You want a bigger audience.'

'I'm an artist, Mr. Preston. I need a bit of atmosphere, you understand me. Hymns in the evening, with the vox humana out, that fetches 'em.'

'And to what do we owe the pleasure this morning?'

'A little bird,' he said. He obviously wanted to go on, and I saw him get the all clear from Rose. 'You two might be interested to hear that Rose and I have fixed things up.'

'What?' I said, taken aback. 'You're a quick worker.'

'Yes,' he said, 'holy matrimony for these babies.'

'Oh, I am glad,' Una said, and kissed Rose, who blushed beneath her make-up.

'I shan't be married in white,' she said, taking Maréchal's arm; 'not seeing it's wartime.' This was a long sentence for Rose, spoken under the influence of transmuting love. Rose's flood-gates opened and I heard her discussing the details of the affair with Una. Gone was her accustomed mute distress.

'Well, hearty congratulations, Maréchal,' I said, shaking his hand. 'You're a lucky man, and I wish you both all the best.'

'Thanks, old man,' he smiled broadly, his teeth showing black against the frost.

'A proposal of marriage,' I said to Una when they had gone, 'makes every woman a girl again.'

'Nonsense,' she said.

'Who are these parcels from?' I asked.

'Mother and father.'

'My goodness, have they been sending all these years?' And I had nearly forgotten their existence.

'Yes. They never miss.'

Their faithfulness contrasted sharply with my neglect of Una. 'You're a lucky girl, Una. No one has been sending to me.'

'Give your family a chance. You can't expect their mail to reach you from the other side of the grave.'

'I do. And what about my sister? She's alive and kicking, and she never writes.'

'Why should she?'

'Yes, why should she indeed? She's married, and she has all those children to think of. What's more, she's happily married.'

'You're married too, Phil. Married to me. And don't you forget it. What's more, you're happily married, or you're damned well going to be.'

This speech took me by surprise. The possibility had never occurred to me. 'Sammy,' I called to my twin on the far side of the Styx, 'is this my happiness? Ask mother. Ask father.'

I listened for a reply to the accompaniment of Una getting the breakfast. No answer came from Sammy Blundel. In my mind's eye I saw, instead of the Styx, a lake, part grey, part sunlit. On the near side of the lake were townlets and promontories, gently sloping fields and meadows under cultivation. In one of the meadows Trixie was sitting among flowers. Reflected in the still waters I saw a thousand different lives, some in huts, some in houses, each life

carefully built up by parents and schoolmasters for its happiness to be. I saw the furniture of childhood, the desks and inkpots of the schoolroom, the marks, the playing fields, scenes of the vital excruciating tests, the holidays, and the romantic friends. Isolated towers of school certificate and scholarship examinations stood out in the distance. But all the promise and the effort and the expectation led to nothing that could be seen; the outlines were hidden beneath the deep water of the lake.

On the far side of the lake the ground rose steeply to desolate wooded foothills, thence to bare mountains, until the view was lost among snowy summits swathed in mist and storm. I saw my cousin Millicent, a black speck, clambering among the rocks on the far side, her back towards me, as if she had been bathing in the lake, and had swum across. Where could she have left her clothes and her towel? I shivered.

There were two letters in the post that morning, one from Bell and one from Aunt Rachel. I opened Aunt Rachel's first. It was short and painful, announcing the death of Millicent from tuberculosis. That's how the family hit you, when you're not looking, or maundering in a philosophical way. My little cousin, the baby in the house when I was at school, was gone. The tears came to my eyes as I saw her innocent form. She used to wear very modest home-made dresses, either because Aunt Rachel thought it wrong to buy good ones while she was still growing, or because her natural taste was that way. I had last seen her in dark blue, 'navy' I think she said. 'How do you like my navy?' I remember thinking of two dictators in conversation. She had the gift of adding personal touches to her clothes by means of coloured handkerchiefs and bows and collars. With her high flush and delicate skin she made more expensive girls look dull and conventional.

'Una,' I called out loudly, 'Millicent has thrown herself into the lake.'

'What!' said Una in a shocked voice. She had not accompanied me in my rambles.

I passed her the letter.

'Poor little kid,' she said. 'I only met her once or twice. She always looked so pretty.'

'I'm glad she made such an impression on you,' I said proudly, as if Millicent were my affair.

We read of her illness, when she lay propped against her pillow, flushed, with a frown between her eyes. It was not to be tolerated that Millicent should be allowed by society to suffer and die while the rest of the world went about its business, its wars, and its pleasures. She had been overwhelmed in a catastrophe that was outside her small control. The ordinary supports that human beings on their feet can give to the sick, the cheerfulness, the bright smile, the hand on the forehead, the hot drink, the smooth bed, had proved inadequate. We had not been spectators, Una and I, but all the philosophy in the world could not detach us from the child's suffering. Quietly and sickeningly the letter described the final battle, the outraged cells of the body, the change for the worse and the other unfavourable symptoms, all pointing to the end we knew.

I thought of the small black speck and refused to let the matter be closed.

I paced round the house, observing irrelevant details, an alarm clock that had stopped in the kitchen, a school-book of Trixie's thrown anyhow into a corner, with its back doubled over.

I opened the Bell & Otley letter which had been waiting in my coat pocket. It was a short affair, informing me in businesslike phrases that I had no case against the Smallwoods. Their claim on the estate was watertight. This meant in effect that our five thousand pounds was gone.

My gamble with the Rev. Cyril had failed, and I inherited no money, nothing, in fact, of the family fortunes except the goodwill, if it might be so described, of a losing business, and The Laurels at Godmansterne, which was mine for what it was worth after the battle of Britain, or might be worth after subsequent enemy action. 'What's the idea, dad?' I said aloud, for he was an orderly man, and must have known well enough what the effect of his action would be.

In the same envelope was another letter, which answered my question in some respects. It was on the subject of my father's business, which was not a saleable asset because it had been making losses for many years before my father's death, but for which my father had provided, by means of a reserve fund set up with his solicitor as trustee, that I could, if I showed myself so disposed, clear off the liabilities, and start afresh.

In this letter Bell laid the plan before me. It was a straightforward arrangement, not hitherto disclosed to my colleagues. All I had to do was to instruct my solicitor to act.

If I hesitated it was not out of regard for the feelings of others. This was my affair. From my point of view I was the person principally concerned, and my mind was made up from the first. I would go ahead. If I hesitated it was for quite another reason, it was out of curiosity as to my father's motives. He who hesitates, I told myself, is lost, and hastened to add that curiosity killed the cat. Nevertheless I hesitated, as if I must know something hidden, must probe a mystery before I took the plunge.

If, I thought, I am in my own person the physical representative of my parents, their standard-bearer in the battle of life ahead of me, I must balance and judge my conduct by their ideals. Without this knowledge, I thought, my enterprises, however pithy and momentous, would turn awry. How, therefore, to put myself in possession of this

essential information, that would determine my future action?

I read through my father's will, a copy of which was enclosed with Bell's letter.

I give devise and bequeath the remainder of my estate real and personal including leaseholds to my son absolutely.

A vote of confidence in me, if ever there was one, so any one reading the document would say, for Herbert Empresson was known to be a warm man. Yet all it amounted to was a derelict house. And the real good turn my father had done me, the arrangement for rescuing the business, had been done in secret, and had only now come to light. For that he made a journey to Nottingham when he was too ill to travel. Possibly it cost him his life. But the business he wished to establish, a base voice whispered, was Herbert Empresson Ltd. There was no provision for the addition of 'and Son.'

I went to my desk and took out the packet of my father's business papers and letters. The letters I put on the kitchen fire. By the glare of the flames I regarded the faded photograph of myself and Sammy Blundel on our mother's knee. The family looked at thus struck me as putting out to sea on a raft rather than forging across the bar in a liner. I scanned the expression of each of us; father, energetic and aggressive, perhaps quarrelsome, his jaw set firmly above his stiff collar; mother queenly, above criticism; my little sister with her eyes screwed up; Sammy Blundel and myself vacuous, our self-important baby faces bearing no relation to our inability to cope with our surroundings. I could not help laughing.

Una came in. 'What's the joke?' she said. I showed her my family. To my surprise she seized on the picture eagerly. 'Oh, Phil, I'd be thrilled to have it.'

'Seriously?' I said.

Una by her expression made me see that there was nothing out of the ordinary in the family group. Families were like that. That was what they were like. In which case I was on a wild-goose chase. My search in the past was vain.

I wrote to Miss Cain at my office, telling them that my sight was recovering rapidly, and that they were to expect me back in about a month's time. I said nothing of my private information about the state of affairs, and I smiled to myself when I received their businesslike reply, congratulating me on my recovery, and assuring me that my return would be welcome. I felt by no means sure on that point.

Snow fell on Christmas Eve, a soft white blanket, obliterating our paths and our road and our meadow. I was privately thankful for the prospect of a white Christmas. 'Seasonable,' I urged, shivering in our cold house.

'You and your white Christmases,' Una said.

I told her that we would discuss my business letters at night. 'Lying in bed,' I said.

Una said there was no need for me to go to bed for that.

Before we turned in we went to Trixie's room to say good night. She was asleep, however. At the end of her bed was her stocking, which she had outgrown, but which was still retained by unwritten agreement. I filled it with inexpensive presents, most of which she would have had in any event. Every bulge gave me pleasure. The largest was a pair of dancing slippers. Through the closed eyes of the ambitious little girl I could imagine her career opening before her.

The night settled in with an icy grip, still and silent. It would need a tearing wind, with relaxation behind it, to bring in the thaw, so that the earth might stretch itself and breathe again. Then birds would sing and animals sniff the air. So might a yet unseen force, some day, loosen the Nazi grip on Europe, letting the individual spirits soar

again. Ahead of us, round the corner of February, was the spring.

After we had gone to bed I told Una about the arrangement made by my father for the firm of Empresson, and of the possibility of my taking matters into my own hands.


'That 's the idea,' she said, as if there were no decision to be made. She sounded excited. 'Here 's to the Empressons, past, present—and future.'

'What do you mean?' I looked at her narrowly from my horizontal position. Narrowly because I was doing mental arithmetic, which always makes me squint. 'September,' I added in an awed voice, having jumped the nine months.

'August,' she whispered, 'that 's what I make it.'

'I will look into the future,' I said.

There was no reply from Una. I switched off the light and closed my eyes. In the darkness I saw a procession of stars from left to right, pin-points in red and gold against the black etheric. Now, I thought, I will see what has never yet been seen by man or woman. The void glowed a brilliant flame colour, then reverted to deepest black, and the seemingly endless procession of stars continued. In a few minutes, or it may have been hours, I went to sleep with our secret, Una's and mine, our joy and our sorrow undisclosed.



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